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The Lasso King's League



OR,

THE TIGERS OF TEXAS.

A Romance of Heroes in Buckskin
and a Companion Story to "Buck
Taylor, the Saddle King."

BY COLONEL PRENTISS INGRAHAM,
AUTHOR OF "BUFFALO BILL'S GRIP," "WILD
BILL, THE PISTOL DEAD SHOT," "BUFFALO
BILL'S BONANZA," ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE LASSO KING.

"You sent for me, colonel?" and Buck Taylor, the Saddle King, entered the quarters of Colonel Forsythe, at the new military post established nearer the Rio Grande, and upon the border of the country of the Comanches.

Colonel Forsythe was a new commander in that part of the country, and had not yet gotten acquainted with the men under him.

A man of great ability, courage and determi-

"NO, MONTE JOE, I WILL CAPTURE THE RUFFIAN MYSELF!" AND THE RANCHERO'S DAUGHTER WENT BY LIKE A SHOT UPON HER MATCHLESS HORSE.

nation, he had been sent to the Rio Grande frontier, where just then a man of his caliber was needed, for the lawlessness of the country was becoming such as to spread terror far and wide into peaceful settlements.

There was not only the Indians to contend with but the wildest element of whites, from the desperadoes of New Mexico, the outlaws of Texas and the raiders from Mexico.

The colonel had promptly established his post, and selected a situation from which it would take a large force to drive him.

He had chosen well, or rather the one sent to select the site had done so, for the position on the hill was a natural fortification, a limpid stream flowed around it on three sides, and there was timber in plenty and prairie lands of the richest pasturage for cattle and horses.

The cabins had been quickly built for quarters, the cavalry, infantry and light-artillery camped advantageously, and Colonel Forsythe was beginning to feel that he was ready for work.

At the words of Buck Taylor, who had entered his quarters, he turned from his desk and beheld a man of whom he had heard much yet never met.

A man stood before him clad in buckskin and six feet four inches in height, straight as an Indian, a perfect athlete in form, and with the free and easy carriage of the native Texan.

He wore high-top boots, upon the heels of which were massive silver spurs, and though in buckskin he was dressed like one who might be called a cowboy dandy, so neat was his appearance.

He had doffed the wide-brimmed sombrero he wore upon entering the quarters, and his face was revealed as cheery, fearless to recklessness, and that of a man to do and dare any deed that mortal could accomplish.

He wore no beard, his face was bronzed almost as brown as an Indian's, and his long chestnut-hued hair hung far below his massive shoulders.

He was armed with a pair of large, silver-mounted revolvers, a carved-handled bowie, and from a hook in his belt, on his right side, hung a coiled lariat of finest make.

A striking-looking personage he certainly was, and so Colonel Forsythe regarded him.

The Cowboy Ranger had not given his name, simply saying:

"You sent for me, colonel?"

"You are the Saddle King, I believe?" said Colonel Forsythe, regarding the man with interest and admiration combined.

"So my pards call me, sir."

"And the Lasso Demon, also?"

"Yes, sir."

"But your name is Buck Taylor?"

"It is, sir."

"Well, Buck Taylor, I am glad to make your acquaintance, and I am very sure that we will be good friends," and the colonel arose and extended his hand, an act which he had instant cause to regret when he felt the grip of the cowboy chief, which nearly crushed his fingers, so iron-like was his grasp.

"I'll know better next time," thought the colonel, while aloud he said:

"I have to thank you, Mr. Taylor, for selecting such a perfect site as this one for me."

"The officer who brought me my orders suggested that I should send you to hunt me up a position, and I am most glad that I did so."

"I supposed you wanted a strong position, sir, with water, timber and grass in plenty, and where you could throw troops quickly where wanted; and so I selected this site, though it is in rather an exposed locality, as you must know, colonel."

"Yes, but so much the better, for it will show the Indians and the outlaws that we are not afraid of them, while it will prove to the settlers that we have come here to protect them."

"But I wished to say to you, Taylor, that I applied to have you sent to my command."

"Thank you, sir, but my men?"

"As I understand it, you are a cowboy chief, and have organized your men into a League, rendering service when called upon as guides, scouts and rangers?"

"Yes, sir, that is just it."

"And a valuable band you are, too, from all accounts, for it was you, I believe, that broke up the gang known as Tiger Tom's Terrors?"

"We supposed we had crushed them, sir, but they are at their old tricks again."

"I thought that you had killed Tiger Tom?"

"I did, sir."

"It was in a duel with lariats, I heard?" and the colonel seemed anxious to draw the Texan out to talk of the affair.

"Yes, sir, we trailed Tiger Tom to his lair, and as we had nothing against the men, or could prove nothing, though I felt sure they were a bad lot, I agreed to settle it with Tiger Tom himself."

"He selected lassoes, and I roped him, so that settled it, his men departing, while his body was given to his wife for burial."

"His wife?"

"Yes, sir; the man was a giant, as you may have heard, and was a soldier, but killed and robbed a paymaster, deserted, and seeking Texas became an outlaw."

"He was a larger man than I am, and became known as Tiger Tom, and the Tiger of Texas, and was wont to go to the settlements, get drunk, gamble and surely kill some one before his spree was over."

"I volunteered to capture him, and after a long while we met, as stated, and his wife was left in charge of the ranch."

"She is young and as beautiful a woman as I ever saw, while she is also dangerous, I take it, if she is aroused."

"I could never understand such a woman loving Tiger Tom, and yet she influenced him just as she willed, where no man dare attempt to do so."

"Now, colonel, I have heard that the Tigers have a new leader, and are again on the trail for plunder and scalps."

"Yes, that is just why I sent for you, as I wish to know, Taylor, if you will undertake to ferret out who this outlaw leader is, where the band have their retreat and run them to earth for me?"

"I'll undertake the work, colonel," was the prompt response of the King of the Lariat.

"You relieve my mind greatly, Taylor, by this decision, and you shall have what force you need."

"I wish only my cowboys, sir, my Lasso Kings as the soldiers call us, and we'll go into the war lariats in hand, for they come handy for hangman's ropes," was the significant response of Buck Taylor.

"Well, I leave all to you, Taylor, so get your League of Lasso-Throwers together and begin work whenever you please," said the colonel, and, as Buck Taylor left his quarters he said to himself:

"That is the very man I need, and he will do all I expect of him."

CHAPTER II.

THE LONE MISTRESS OF THE RANCH.

"MISSION RANCH," as it was called, was oddly situated, for it arose in the prairie like a huge bee-hive, its sides being very steep, while a ledge of rocks, some twenty feet in height, ran like an enormous backbone to a range of hills a mile in the rear.

The hive-like hill was some sixty feet in height, very heavily timbered, and a stream flowed by it, fed by numerous springs in the timber.

Long years before, to which the memory of no inhabitant on the border went back, the hill had been a Spanish Mission, for there were the ruins of an old chapel still standing, and every evidence that the place had been long occupied by some order of the church in Mexico.

There was a burying-ground on the hillside, too, but any trace of an inscription on the stones had been worn away by time.

Another evidence was there of death not found in the graveyard, for the skeleton forms of several scores of human beings were scattered about the hill and among the ruins, showing that there had been a massacre of the inmates who once dwelt there.

Where there was evidence that the Mission had been burned at the time of the massacre, there yet stood a tower, in the top of which hung a bell, deep-toned and solemn.

Men gave the old place a wide berth when their trails led them in that locality, and Texans, Mexicans and Indians looked upon it as the abode of evil spirits.

The "Haunted Mission" it was called away over in the white settlements, and the bravest had no desire to penetrate its mysteries or invade its seclusion.

It was a surprise there to all who knew of the Haunted Mission when a hunter came into Trail Crossing one night and averred that he had seen lights on the hill and heard singing.

This rumor was verified soon after by a Government carrier who passed it in the daytime, and had seen men at work there erecting a cabin, while their horses were staked out upon the prairie near by.

Other reports came in until it was certain that the Haunted Mission did have more than ghostly occupants.

That the place had found some one bold enough to make his home there could not be longer doubted, for cattle were seen grazing about the hill, ponies were staked out near, two new cabins were visible upon the hill and there was no longer room to doubt.

Had there been, the last doubt was dispelled one night when a man, a perfect giant in stature, rode into Trail Crossing, put up at the tavern, and announced himself as Tom Tracey, ranchero at the Haunted Mission.

He stated that he had gone there to dwell, had come to the settlement to purchase cattle, gamble and get on a spree, all three of which he did.

His cattle were sent off to the Mission Ranch, under the care of a couple of cowboys who had come with him, and business attended to, "Tom Tracey, ranchero," proceeded to paint Trail Crossing a carmine hue.

He proved himself an expert with cards, and won largely, while he was not long in showing that he was a dead shot when it came to a game with revolvers or trumps.

His money he spent lavishly, and having im-

bibed to an extent that would have floored any other man in Texas, he made a short and telling speech to the extent that he was an outlaw, with a price upon his head, and he extended an invitation to any man in need of capital to win the money, for it went, be he dead or alive.

A man more avaricious than cautious at once took up the gauntlet and died with his boots on under a dead shot from Tom Tracey.

After a week spent in the settlement, the ranchero departed for his home, and left behind him a name that clung to him long after his death at the hands of Buck Taylor—the name given him being "Tiger Tom."

Having introduced the man who had turned the Haunted Mission into his ranch, I will now ask the reader to accompany me to the home of the desperado soon after the lariat duel between the Tiger of Texas and Buck Taylor, the Saddle King, and which ended in the death of the Tom Tracey, who, in the cowboy chief, more than met his match.

The cabin of Tiger Tom had been well built, and was a substantial structure, erected upon the ruins of the old chapel.

It was large, comfortable, and furnished in a manner that one would not expect to find in that border land.

There were two large rooms on either side of a wide passageway, and a piazza twelve feet in width running all around the house, with a log kitchen and dining-room connected in the rear.

A spring was near the cabin, some out-houses in the rear, and a vegetable garden beyond, while scattered about in front were beds of flowers, which, with the furnishing of the house showed a woman's hand, guided by refinement and taste.

There was a stone corral in the rear, a natural one of rocks, except where here and there open spaces had been filled in with stone, and the approach to the house was directly in front, up a steep trail, the only way a horse could go and come, though a man on foot could, with a little difficulty climb the hill-sides.

From the corral it seemed as though a trail ran back toward the hills, along the ridge, or backbone of rocks before spoken of.

The scattered bones of the dead had all been gathered up and made into a monument of their own in the little burying-ground, a ghastly monument indeed, unique and weird.

At the time the ranch is presented to the reader, one pleasant day just at the sunset hour, a woman stood in the timber looking down upon a grave which was covered with wild flowers of the prairie.

She was a woman of commanding presence, and her perfect form was robed in a riding-habit of black velvet, elaborately trimmed with gold lace and buttons. A sombrero with a broad brim encircled by a gold cord, sat jauntily upon her haughtily poised head, while a heavy sable plume fell over to her shoulder.

The hat was looped up upon one side with a pin representing a gold tiger with ruby eyes, and in front was a diamond star of five points.

Her face was a study, for it was beautiful, fearless and resolute, the eyes being full of a slumbering passion that it might be dangerous to arouse to anger.

Around her slender waist was a belt containing a pair of handsome revolvers, one on either hip, and her hands were covered with gauntlet gloves.

A strange person indeed was she to be in that wild land, and yet she looked like one who had no fear of her surroundings, and who could take care of herself under most any circumstances that might arise.

And this beautiful woman was the widow of Tom Tracey, the ranchero, and it was by his grave that she stood, gazing with a strange expression in her face down upon the flower-covered mound beneath which slept his last sleep the once dreaded desperado, whose merciless deeds had won for him the name of the Tiger of Texas.

CHAPTER III.

ON THE MISSISSIPPI.

THE scene of my story goes back some years, changing from the wild frontier of Texas, to the Father of Waters, up which majestic river a "floating palace" is steaming her way.

It is not a pleasant night without, and nearly all the passengers are gathered in the saloon, among them one joyous group chatting merrily together.

The center of this group of a dozen people is a young girl scarcely over eighteen, and that she comes from the land of orange blossoms, her dark olive skin and glorious black eyes show.

Her form is above the medium height, willowy, graceful in every move, and her face is one to win men by the score.

At last she turns to a gentleman at her side and asks:

"Mr. Seldon, who is that magnificent-looking man standing with folded arms gazing at them play cards at that table?"

"There are several men there, Miss Valerie?" was the answer, somewhat petulant it seemed because the lovely girl saw other man than himself.

"There is but one man there to answer my

description of a magnificent man, Mr. Seldon," was the quick reply.

"Oh! you mean that giant fellow with his arms folded?"

"Yes, he does look the giant among pigmies, I admit.

"Yet he is what I would call a perfectly-formed man, my ideal of manhood, Mr. Seldon."

"He is too gross."

"No, he is not gross, his face is refined, his manners most courtly, for I have observed him in conversation with others, and he has a most intelligent face, yet one that can show him to be a saint or a Satan, as he may be guided by love, or other motives.

"He is a strange study to me, Mr. Seldon, and strange it is how I have met him within the past two weeks.

"I saw him at the races one day last week, and though he bet and lost heavily he did not change an expression of his face.

"Next I saw him ride by our house on horseback, and oh! what a superb horseman he is, Mr. Seldon.

"Then I saw him at the opera, and what was my surprise this afternoon to find him on the steamer.

"Who is he, Mr. Seldon?"

"Miss Duffield, I do not know any man whom it pleases to have the lady he is with go into ecstasies over another man; but I will return good for evil by finding out for you who your giant admirer is, for I observe that he is far more interested in Miss Valerie Duffield, than in the game he is pretending to watch.

"Pardon me, and I will go upon my voyage of discovery," and Frank Seldon arose and left the side of the lovely New Orleans girl whom he madly loved himself, and naturally felt hurt at her admiration of another, and a stranger.

"Captain, who is that overgrown fellow yonder?" he asked of the captain of the steamer.

"He is registered as Thomas Tracey of California, sir," responded the captain.

"Who and what is he?"

"I have heard that he was a gentleman gambler.

"He came down the river with me some weeks ago, played heavily and won; but he caught a fellow cheating him, and taking him up bodily, went out upon the guards and threw him into the river.

"Fortunately he was a good swimmer, or he would have been drowned; but he swam ashore and was afraid to come aboard again when I landed for him."

"It is just what I supposed he would do."

"Don't express to him your opinion of him, Mr. Seldon, if you will allow me to advise you," said the captain as he walked away.

As Frank Seldon returned toward the ladies' cabin, a burst of melody suddenly rung through the boat, for Valerie Duffield had been led to the piano to sing.

Her voice was an exquisite one, and held the passengers spellbound as she sung a weird Mexican melody.

A rapturous applause greeted her when the last note died away, and turning, she beheld the tall stranger standing much nearer, and though he had not applauded, his face revealed to her how he appreciated her singing.

Urged to sing again and again she did so, wisely selecting some sweet ballad that all could feel, and avoiding a succession of trills and quavers that would simply show the compass of her wonderful voice.

At last she rose from the piano just as the captain came forward and said:

"Mr. Tracey has consented also to favor us with a song, for he has been urged by those who heard him on the trip down the river some weeks ago."

"He sings base, I judge from his looks," was the ill-natured remark of Frank Seldon, and as the stranger moved in an easy way toward the piano, he added:

"I have found out who your hero is, Miss Duffield."

"Indeed! and who is he?" asked Valerie, with considerable interest.

"A gambler."

"Ah! I had half-suspected it; but 'sh! for he is going to sing."

There was no awkwardness about the man, large as he was, and he sat down with the air of one who knew his power, running his fingers over the keys with the skill of a master.

Then in a voice that was rich, sympathetic and full of melody he sung a song unknown to all present, yet that caught the ear and touched the heart at once, playing an accompaniment that was in exquisite harmony with the words and air.

What he sung was as follows:

EURLLEE.

O'er the desert sands of duty,

Eurllee,

Hope allures to isles of beauty,

Eurllee!

Where her starry heights are glowing,

And the streams of song are flowing,

There is bliss beyond our knowing,

Eurllee!

And from realms of love eternal,

Eurllee,

Sweet, seraphic strains supernal,

Eurllee!

O'er the wearied spirit breaking,

Bear a balm to soothe its aching,

Thoughts of hours with thee awaking,

Eurllee!

Thou art lost to me forever,

Eurllee,

For the seas of fate dis sever,

Eurllee!

But thy memory, o'er me stealing,

Harps upon the strings of feeling,

Joy's elusive isles revealing,

Eurllee!

The singer arose from the piano amid the ringing applause, and glided from the saloon by one of the stern doors.

He would not obey an encore, and somehow Valerie Duffield did not wish him to return, for the song, the voice and words had gone deep down into her heart.

From that moment Frank Seldon found her an inattentive listener to his conversation, and soon after she retired to her state-room.

As she did so she beheld the stranger with a cigar between his lips seated at a table far forward in the gentlemen's cabin playing cards.

There was money on the table, and he was indeed a gambler.

CHAPTER IV.

THE BURNING STEAMER.

VALERIE DUFFIELD was the only daughter of a widowed mother, one who belonged to an old and aristocratic New Orleans family, yet had but a small income to live upon.

From her teens Valerie had been a lovely girl, and was welcomed everywhere, and as she entered society she became at once a reigning belle.

Had she so wished she could have married a fortune ere she was eighteen; but she had her own romantic ideas regarding marriage, and always was wont to say that the one who won her heart would be a noble specimen of manhood.

Her beauty of face and form, her wit and intelligence, with a magnetic manner that drew admirers to her at all times, made for her suitors by the score, and the proudest names and richest fortunes were laid at her feet, yet in vain.

She had accepted an invitation from some Northern friends for a trip with them, and a round of the watering places, and fully a dozen were in the pleasant party that were upon the steamer.

Finding that he could not entertain Valerie, Frank seldom went forward, watched the game of cards which Thomas Tracey was playing, and winning, too, and smoking a cigar to soothe his ruffled humor, decided to retire.

As he stood by the table he could not but admire the man in spite of himself.

Though towering inches over six feet, he was yet a perfect specimen of physical manhood.

He was not awkward, his hands and feet were small and shapely, he was dressed in perfect taste.

His face was really noble in its contour, the eyes expressive, a sorrowful light resting in them as though from memories that haunted him of past sorrows or bitterness, and his hair was thick and clustered in waving masses about his temples and neck.

"He is a dangerous man for a fellow to have as a rival, and that voice of his is melody itself.

"I wish he had never sung that song, for I saw it impressed Valerie Duffield.

"Well, he is booked for Memphis, so there we leave him, and I only hope there will be no chance for her to meet him on the trip."

With this fervent wish in his heart, Frank Seldon glanced through the now deserted cabins, for the gamblers alone remained up, and then sought his state-room.

The game at last finished, for those playing against the luck of Thomas Tracey, which was phenomenal, had lost all they could afford, and so had withdrawn.

The gambler lighted another cigar and went out upon the deck, pacing to and fro.

"That girl's face haunts me," he mused.

"Such a woman could make me a good man, or a demon, at her sweet will."

"She did feel that song, as I intended she should, and why not, for I never sung better in my life."

"I would give much to know her, and I will."

"I am only a gambler, and she—well, the moonlight falls upon flowers and weeds alike—Ah! what is that smoke arising?"

"I must see to that."

He hastily descended to the cabin-deck, to discover the whole pantry in flames.

At once he sprang upon the guard-rail, and hailed the pilot:

"Pilot, head for the shore, as the boat is on fire!"

Then he gave the alarm, and rushing to the cabin, began to arouse the inmates, making his way rapidly aft.

He had seen which state-room Valerie Duffield entered, and knocking at the door, he said:

"Dress yourself quickly, for the steamer is on fire."

"Do not be alarmed, for all may yet be well."

Calmly came the answer from within:

"I thank you, sir, and will obey."

"She has nerve," said the gambler, as now out of the state-rooms rushed men, women and children in a perfect panic.

"There is no danger!"

"Dress yourselves!" his voice called out, and then he ran quickly to the scene of danger.

Roustabouts and waiters were working hard to quench the flames, which were rapidly gaining headway in spite of all that could be done.

Springing to their aid, the gambler worked with a will, his voice and manner calming and encouraging the workmen.

But it was of no use, the steamer must go, and the pilot, standing nobly to his post, called down that on either side were steep banks, and he was running for the nearest point where a landing could be made.

The bells rung for more steam to be crowded on, and the burning boat fairly flew over the waters, the flames now lighting up the dark shores and causing, by their glare, the river to look like a crimson stream.

On, on flew the boat, amid the shrieks of women and children, the cries of men, the crackling of the flames, the splash of the paddle-wheels and the deep booming of the escape-pipes.

"Captain, the boat is doomed, and we must try and save life now," cried the gambler.

"Yes, but it will be a fearful holocaust, I fear," answered the brave old captain, in a low tone.

And back through the fright-maddened crowd in the cabin sped Thomas Tracey, trying to calm them with his voice and manner, but in vain.

Soon he came to where the crowd had gathered aft, and among them his eyes were searching for one person.

There she stood, perfectly calm, but her face deathly pale.

About her were her friends, some half-dressed only, most of them bewailing their fate, and strong men wholly unnerved by the danger.

Frank Seldon was there, not fearing for himself, but for her, yet powerless to aid by word or act.

Suddenly, with a great crash, the boat struck, not the shore, but a sand-bar a hundred yards away from the land.

Thomas Tracey saw the situation at a glance; the flames were now crowding aft, all communication with the forward part of the boat being cut off, and with a bound he sprang to the side of Valerie Duffield:

"We must spring overboard and swim for it."

"Trust yourself to my care."

"I will not desert my friends," she said, firmly.

"I will return for them, and they can be lowered meanwhile to the deck below."

"No, I will not—"

"Pardon me, but you must," he broke in, and taking her in his arms he sprang clear of the guards into the river.

Down they went, but a few vigorous strokes and the man was swimming swiftly toward the shore.

He soon reached it, and without a word plunged in and swam back to the steamer.

Two boats had been lowered, but one had been swamped by the panic-stricken passengers, while the other was doing good work.

The party on the deck above were being lowered to the lower deck, and a lady was at once handed down by Frank Seldon to the gambler in the water, who swam to the shore with her.

Thus he went twice more, and then, as the crew of the boat would not yield it to him, he sprang forward, and even in that appalling moment cries of admiration arose as they saw him dash them right and left with his giant strength, and springing in, seize the oars.

"You are men and can swim ashore."

"Women and children need aid yonder," he cried, and he sent the boat flying to the stern, where it was at once filled up.

Quickly he landed his load and returned, and again he landed a score of human beings.

Once more he started back, but the flames drove all gathered on the stern to leap into the river, and but a few were picked up, while others were borne away by the swiftly rushing stream.

CHAPTER V.

THE GAMBLER HERO.

It was an appalling, or piteous scene, that night of horror on the Mississippi, for some perished in the flames, others sprang into the river to die by drowning, and there were many who floated away upon doors, boxes and gang-planks tossed overboard, to be picked up far below by boats coming off from the plantations, or other steamers coming up-stream.

Where two-thirds had been saved from a fearful death, however, one-third had gone to the last reckoning.

Among those were men, women and children, some of the first named the crew of the boat.

Upon the shore, watching in terror the wild scene, the flames illuming river and land as brilliantly as day, stood the saved from the burning steamer.

As the last boat-load came ashore, picked up from the river, one wild cheer went up for the man who had saved by his pluck and exertions half a hundred human beings from death.

His hair was crisp under the rim of his hat, his dark mustache burned, his face blistered, and also his hands, while in patches there were burnt holes in his clothing.

But his nerve was the same, never having deserted him.

He seemed to wish to avoid those who pressed toward him, but in vain, for he was supporting in his arms Frank Seldon who had nobly done his duty until overcome by the heat and his exertions.

Had not the gambler sprung aboard and seizing him in his arms placed him in the boat, he would have perished where he sunk down upon the steamer, overcome from exhaustion.

"This gentleman needs your care," said Thomas Tracey, as he placed Seldon upon the bank, and turned away.

His voice was hoarse from shouting his orders and his hard work, and he was going up the bank where the men were gathered, when he felt a touch upon his arm.

Turning, he beheld Valerie.

"You are a hero, Mr. Tracey, one whom many owe their lives to this night."

"You saved me from death, and never can I forget you."

"But you are suffering."

"Oh, no, it is a trifle only, Miss Duffield; but I will see if I cannot find the blankets and things I sent ashore in the first boat."

His courteous manners did not desert him even then, for he raised his hat as he walked away.

In a short while he came back bearing a large bundle in his arms, and Valerie and others were soon enveloped in blankets and spreads, while a fire was built on shore to keep the chilled people warm.

An hour after a boat bound down-stream rounded in above the burning steamer, and Valerie Duffield and her friends went on board to return to New Orleans, for Frank Seldon was in a critical condition, and two of the immediate party had lost their lives, so the trip North was not to be thought of.

The gambler hero aided them in going on board the steamer, secured state-rooms for them, and then only sought rest for himself.

The next day the party reached the city, but Thomas Tracey seemed to feel that he had done his duty and quietly slipped ashore, driving at once to the St. Charles Hotel in a hack.

Valerie Duffield had sent for him to find him gone, for she intended to again thank him for his heroism, and ask him to visit them at their home.

The next day the papers came out with a full account of the burning of the splendid steamer, and in the account occurred the following:

"THE GAMBLER HERO."

"The Hero of the burning steamer was a Mr. Thomas Tracey, about whom we can find no other particulars than that he is a gentleman gambler, traveling where he will for his own pleasure and profit."

"He it was who discovered the pantry to be in flames, and gave the alarm, while his work and example of coolness rendered most valuable service in checking the flames for awhile, which gave a chance to the pilot to run the boat further upstream, for had he been forced to run against the steep banks where no landing could have been made, hardly any one would have survived it is certain."

"By his exertions and wonderful pluck Mr. Tracey saved alone half a hundred lives, and though severely burned himself did not falter in his heroism as long as he could render any one a service."

"Mr. Tracey is now confined to his rooms at the St. Charles, but says that he hopes to be well enough to go northward within ten days."

"It is such heroism, as Gambler Tracey showed that makes us have more confidence in the nobleness of human nature."

This account was read by Valerie Duffield, and then she read it aloud to her mother, who said:

"Valerie, it is our duty to bring that brave man to our home and care for him."

"I will drive down to the hotel this afternoon for him."

And Mrs. Duffield did go, but Thomas Tracey firmly yet politely declined her urgent invitation, but said he would call before he left the city and say good-by.

He did call just two weeks after, and found Valerie alone, and looking very beautiful in a morning wrapper.

He had had his hair cut short, his mustache shaved off and his features were more plainly seen, and Valerie saw there much to admire and respect.

"Mrs. Duffield, I have to thank you for keeping my rooms fragrant each day with fresh flowers, and many a little delicacy to tempt the appetite."

"You have been most kind to me, a stranger," he said.

"I do not, cannot regard you as a stranger, Mr. Tracey, after what you have done for me."

"It is kind of you to say so, Miss Duffield, and let me tell you that I am emboldened to tell you that there is but one woman in the world to me now, yourself."

"As we are to part, I will tell you that I loved you the first moment I saw you."

"I am a man without any profession, save that of gambling. I am a wanderer, a ship without an anchor, and I have no future, only a liberal income from card-playing."

"But I will go my way now a better man from knowing you, and very anxious to win a fortune to offer you, though that were vain."

"Yet, some time in the future we may meet again, and then, if you are not pledged to another, I shall ask you if you can love me."

A hero even in his love-making, thought Valerie, and completely won by this strange man, who so boldly told her what he was, and of his love, she answered frankly:

"And when you ask me I will tell you that I do love you, Thomas Tracey, for I know just how this strange meeting between you and me is to end—I am to be your wife."

"Go your way, and when you will come to me, come and claim me."

And such was their wooing; and one year after, upon the day her mother was laid in the grave, Thomas Tracey came and claimed Valerie Duffield as his wife.

CHAPTER VI.

GHOST OR MORTAL.

BACK to the Mission Ranch in far-away Texas, the scene shifts, and to the evening when the wife of Thomas Tracey, known in the Lone Star State as Tiger Tom, is standing by the grave of the man who so strangely wooed and won her.

In the five years that have passed, since that night on the Mississippi, when she was rescued from the burning steamer, Valerie was changed but little; if anything she was grown more mature and beautiful.

Perhaps there is a certain stern expression about her beautiful mouth that the career of her husband has called there, for to win gold for her, to make her a home fit for a queen to dwell in, he had become reckless of honor, and drifted from bad to worse until they at last found an abiding-place in Texas in the old Mission.

With no word of reproach Valerie had followed the fortunes of the man, who under her influence should have become all that was good, yet when thirst for gold, for her sake, had become a very demon, all that his nature was capable of for bad.

And now as she stands there by the grave, she muses aloud, bringing up the phantom of the past; as she softly repeats words of the song she had heard him sing that night on the steamer upon the Mississippi and which had so impressed her:

"Thou art lost to me forever,
Eurylee—
For the seas of fate dis sever
Eurylee!
But thy memory o'er me stealing,
Harps upon the strings of feeling,
Joys elusive isles revealing,
Eurylee!"

A moment she remained silent, and then said, as she pointed to the grave:

"And that is the end of man?"

"Here at my feet, silent in death, lies the man of men whom I loved with all my being, even to reproach him not for his vices and crimes."

"If he sinned, he sought thereby to gain riches for me."

"How strange it was that I, who had it in my power to marry any one of a score of brilliant men, rolling in wealth, men who could have allowed me to live like a queen, should refuse them all to go with one who had little gold to give me, who brought me here to this wild land, while he became dreaded by all who knew him."

"He saved me from death, he won my admiration even before I made his acquaintance."

"And now he, the grand man of men, lies there crumbling to dust beneath my feet."

"I dreamed not that he could meet his match, I had no dread of the result of that meeting so fatal to him, and saw him go forth in all his strength to meet one who mastered him."

"How strange that I feel no revenge against his slayer."

"And yet so it is that I do not!"

"Ah, me! he, too, is a grand man, this Saddle King, this Buck Taylor, the Lasso Demon, and just the one to win a woman's heart, especially such a woman as I am."

"Well, must all be lost for which my dead husband and myself have striven so hard to win, must our gold be swept from us?"

"No, for I will not be one to live in poverty and fill a pauper's grave."

"If I have acquiesced in his sin to gain gold, so am I guilty in act also."

"If I have sinned in the past, then need I not dread still to fight for fortune in the future."

"All that were here as protectors: cowboys and all, excepting old Liza, I have sent away, to go their separate ways in life, for from to-day I am to begin a new life."

"He told me that when I needed to call in those who wear the brand of the Secret League, to hoist the flag and leave it flying day and night."

"I shall do so, for I will not lose all he strove for, I will not let gold in my grasp slip away from me."

She ceased her reverie and stooping plucked a wild flower from the grave and placed it in her bosom.

It was sunset now, and as she turned away from the spot she waved her hand as though in farewell, as though the dead knew her act.

Then she walked along the path leading to the cabin, and entering it, soon returned with a large flag.

A staff was near, upon the highest knoll of the hill, and going to it she attached the flag to the halyards, and at once drew it up to the top, shaking out its folds.

In the gathering twilight the flag was revealed—a red field with a Texas star of gold in the center.

She made the halyards fast, as the breeze blew the flag out straight, and then walked slowly back to the cabin.

As she threw herself into an easy-chair upon the piazza, a negress came from the rear of the house and asked:

"Hab supper now, missy?"

"No, not now. I'll come presently."

"I wish to watch the moon rise out of the prairie," she said in an absent-minded way.

"You looks at de moon too much, missy, fer yer own good, I declar' ter gracious yer does."

"Lordy! but hain't it gwine ter be lonesome here, now yer has sent all de cowboys away."

"You can go too, if you do not wish to remain with me," was the low reply.

"Now dat just hurts me, missy, fer yer knows I'd stick by yer all de time; but come in an' hab some supper soon, fer I doesn't like ter see yer moon-gazin'," and the negress returned to the kitchen in the rear, leaving Valerie to her meditations.

The eastern skies began to wear a silvery light now, and soon after the rim of the moon appeared above the horizon of prairie, and lighted up the darkness of the timber-clad hill.

As the moon sailed boldly into the expanse of the heavens, her golden light dimming the twinkling stars, from the lips of the woman softly fell the lines:

"And now Night's Queen is launched into the ether,
Convoy'd by fleets of stars upon her way;
While wrapped in slumber deep, the Earth
beneath her,
Is sleeping off the fever of the day."

Hardly had she uttered the last words when a form came from the shadows of the timber and slowly approached the cabin.

Who could it be? for Valerie had heard no hoof-falls of a horse approaching, and this man was on foot.

Up the path he came very slowly, straight toward the cabin, and the woman's hand dropped upon the revolver on her hip.

Nearer and nearer he came, until in the bright moonlight, where it fell across the path, he halted and stood revealed.

Then quickly the woman sprung to her feet, her revolver leveled, and from her lips broke the ringing cry:

"Great Heaven! it is Tom Tracey's ghost! but, ghost or mortal, throw up your hands or I fire!"

CHAPTER VII.

WHAT DERRINGER DAVE SAW.

THE new post established by Colonel Forsythe was known as "Roundtop," and changed into "Fort Roundtop," for it was to have as a garrison four guns of a light battery, three troops of cavalry and a battalion of infantry, with the other belongings of an army frontier post.

Besides the scouts, guides, hunters and cowboys to look after the Government cattle, Buck Taylor and his Rangers were to be stationed there, for the Saddle King lost no time in starting for Fort S— to get his men, after his conversation with Colonel Forsythe.

"Well," he muttered, as he rode along, "the Texas Tigers can never have another chief like Tiger Tom, if he really was their chief, so it will not be such very hard work to corral them."

"Still, I am sorry to learn that there is a band of outlaws again on the trails, as I fear they will make a dash upon the settlements."

"I will send word, as soon as I reach Fort S—, to Captain Hassan, to be on his guard again, for his rich ranch will surely tempt them to a raid."

So on he rode until, as he went over the ridge, he saw a horseman coming across the prairie at a canter.

Taking a glass, which hung to his belt, he raised it to his eyes and said at once:

"It is one of my own men—yes, Derringer Dave."

"Nothing could bring him on this trail unless it was to come after me."

Riding on down the ridge he met the horseman on the prairie, after a ride of half a mile.

The stranger was a typical Texan, bronzed-faced and fearless, tall and sinewy, dressed in the garb of a cowboy, his sombrero looped up with a silver star, top-boots, spurs, and riding a fine horse with the very best equipments.

He had on a belt of revolvers and bowie, but in addition carried a derringer pistol on each breast, in a small pocket, ready for quick use at

close quarters, and these had given him his name of Derringer Dave.

A long lariat neatly coiled hung at his waist also, for riding or walking Buck Taylor's Lariat-Throwers never went without their "ropes."

"Well, Cap'n Buck, I'm after you," called out Derringer Dave as he drew near his chief.

"Well, Dave, what's up?"

"The Tigers are on the trails again."

"So I heard on my way to see Colonel Forsythe, for I overtook a train they had made a dash upon but were beaten off."

"Yes, and they made a dash in upon Bennett's ranch, got away with considerable plunder after laying out three of his cowboys, and ran off quite a lot of cattle."

"Ah! they are on the kill and rob both, are they?"

"So it seems, cap'n, but we took their trail and found they made for the Rio Grande, so as there were but a few of us, we went back, and I was sent to tell you."

"Well, Dave, I'm on my way now to Fort S— to get the League together, for we are to go to Roundtop."

"That means hot work, I guess?"

"I hope so, Dave, for we have the work cut out for us to run the Tigers to their den and wipe them out."

"Good! but that is not all I have to tell, Buck."

"Well, Dave?"

"Didn't you kill Tiger Tom, answer me that?"

"I did."

"You killed him?"

"You were there, Derringer Dave."

"I know it."

"Then why do you ask?"

"That's just why I do ask, because I was there."

"Then you saw me kill him."

"I saw you rope him in the duel with lariats, and all thought he was dead."

"His neck was broken."

"So Captain Hassan said, and as he was an army surgeon, he ought to know."

"He does know, and he pronounced Tiger Tom dead."

"I know, and you sent his body to his wife."

"Monte Joe took it, and delivered it to her."

"Sure there is no mistake?"

"How do you mean, Dave?"

"About his being dead."

"There is no mistake, for I caught him fairly around the neck with my lariat, as you saw; his horse bounded away dragging him from the saddle, as I wheeled and spurred off."

"There was no mistake, Dave."

"Then I saw Tiger Tom's ghost, that is all, Buck Taylor," declared Derringer Dave impressively, as he sat upon his horse facing the Saddle King.

At this assertion Buck Taylor laughed.

"Oh! you need not laugh, Cap'n Buck, for I mean what I say."

"You saw his ghost?"

"If you killed Tiger Tom, Buck, I saw his ghost. If you did not kill him, then I saw Tiger Tom himself."

"Derringer Dave, I have not a superstitious bone in my body, and I do not believe in ghosts; but, after my duel with Tiger Tom, if I saw any one whom I might mistake for him, I believe I would run with fright, for that man is dead as surely as I am alive," and the Saddle King spoke with much earnestness.

"Yes, and that is what worries me. Tiger Tom was a larger man than you, and you stand six feet four in your stockings, Buck. And more: he was just such a man as I never saw before, with a face I can never forget."

"Then his dress and whole make-up was out of the run, and I do not believe that two men could live and look just like him. A thousand other men might be mistaken for one another, but never Tiger Tom, and so I say again, if you killed Tiger Tom then I saw his ghost, and if you did not kill him then I saw the man himself."

"Come, Dave, I am going to Fort S—, so turn back with me and as we ride along tell me just what you saw," urged Buck Taylor, really impressed with the earnest manner of a man, who he knew knew no fear, as to what he had seen.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE COWBOY RANGER'S STORY.

"WELL, Cap'n Buck," said Derringer Dave, after the two had ridden on in silence for some time, the cowboy evidently dwelling upon what he had to tell.

"You see, as I said, we went out, a few of us, to trail the raiders, and see just who they were, where they had come from and where they had gone."

"They had gotten a good start of us, or those had who got the plunder and were driving the cattle, and so got to the Rio Grande at night far ahead of the boys who were on their trail."

"As the boys could not see to follow the trail by night, they went into camp; but I told them I would push on and see if I could not come up with the raiders."

"I went on alone, and rode hard, for my horse

was fresh, Buck, I having changed at Windom's ranch, as the animal I had cast a shoe.

"I got close to the river and heard the splashing of the cattle as they were being driven across."

"I then went on foot through the chaparrals and reached the river above the ford."

"There were some twenty men in the band, and they were rounding up several hundred head of cattle that had stampeded at the river, so had our boys pushed on with me we could have emptied a few saddles at least, and saved the stock that had stampeded."

"Yes, you could have done that easily, Dave."

"I felt that; but I had a position near the ford, and saw the rounded-up cattle driven across, and counted them."

"I also counted the raiders."

"How many?" laconically asked Buck Taylor.

"Twenty-one, I saw."

"Mexicans?"

"Buck, I believe these men were of every tribe on earth."

"I saw Mexicans, two I knew were Texans, I heard a Chinnee talking, and next came a nigger."

"Then there were a couple of Injuns, and what else I don't know, but judging from their lingo there was an Irishman along and a Dutchman."

"You see the night was dark, and being alone, and on foot, I didn't wish to be too curious."

"You were right."

"So I kept in hiding, caught all I could by hearing, and what I could see."

"There was one voice I heard, but did not see, and yet it had a familiar tone to me."

"It was the chief, who ever he was, and he gave his orders like a soldier."

"When the gang had rounded-up the cattle I set out on foot along the trail for my horse."

"I had not gone very far before something caused me to look around, but what it was I do not know."

"Now comes the ghost."

"You are right, Buck."

"Tell me of the ghost, Dave."

"Well, I heard no hoof-falls—"

"It was sandy."

"Yes, I admit that; but then I turned around just in time to see a horseman a hundred feet or so from me."

"It was pretty dark, was it not?"

"No, for the moon had risen half an hour before, and it shone right down the trail through the mesquites."

"I at once made a dive for the bushes, but could only go a few feet, they were so thick, so sat there, hoping not to be seen."

"I drew my revolver and held it ready, but did not intend to fire unless he saw me, not knowing who was following him, and my horse was yet some distance away."

"You were right to be cautious, Dave."

"I discovered that, Buck, for I'll tell you what I saw."

"I am most anxious to know, for so far this is a ghost story, Dave, without the ghost."

"The ghost is coming, Buck."

"The moon, as I said, shone right down the trail through the mesquites, and full in the face of the coming horseman."

"I had just time to get quiet in my retreat, when he came into full view."

"You know that I saw Tiger Tom often in Trail City, and that I am no coward, not one to lose my head or be easily deceived, Buck?"

"I'll give you full credit for that, Derringer Dave, for I want no better pard than you in a scrimmage."

"Well, what I saw was the large black horse of Tiger Tom, Mexican saddle and bridle, and all."

"But the rider?"

"Was Tiger Tom."

"Nonsense."

"It is no nonsense, Cap'n Buck, but Gospel truth."

"If you killed him that day, as I before said, it was his ghost."

"If he played possum on you, then it was the Tiger of Texas himself, and none other."

"Tiger Tom was not a man to be easily mistaken for another one."

"No, for he was six feet six, weighed all of two hundred and forty pounds, and had a form and face to remember."

"There he sat in his saddle, looking straight ahead of him."

"He had his lariat hanging at his side, his hands crossed and resting upon his saddle-horn, and he sat bolt upright."

"It did not seem that I heard the sound of his horse's hoofs, the jingle of a spur or buckle, yet I only recalled this afterward, and it may be that I did hear and not then notice it."

"I saw the man, the same face, form, horse and all."

"I was paralyzed at the sight, for I saw you rope him, drag him from his saddle the day of the duel, and all said that he was dead."

"I was one who went with his body up to his cabin, where Monte Joe, the gambler, gave it to his wife for burial."

"So you may be sure that I was amazed."

"I tried to raise my revolver, but my muscles would not obey the impulse of my will, and so the man passed on, while I did not follow for a long while."

"Then I mounted my horse and returned to camp, telling the boys what I had seen, and it was agreed I should come to Roundtop after you."

CHAPTER IX.

DEAD OR ALIVE.

THAT Buck Taylor was impressed with the story of Derringer Dave, he was compelled to admit.

He was not warped by superstition, as many plainmen are, and yet how could Derringer Dave be mistaken?

There were many cowboys in the Lasso-Throwers' League; had they told the same story, Buck Taylor would not only have taken it *cum grano salis*, but laughed at their report of seeing Tiger Tom or his ghost.

He went over his lasso duel with the Tiger of Texas, how his lariat had settled over his neck, the bound of the horse which had dragged him from the saddle, and his own animal's rush which had drawn him along on the ground.

Could there after all be some mistake as to the giant ranchero being killed?

It must be, for Buck Taylor did not believe in ghosts.

So he said:

"Well, Dave, all I can say is that Tiger Tom has the lives of a cat, and was not dead."

"How he escaped I do not know; but it seems that he did do so, and that leaves our work to be done over."

"Kill him?"

"Yes, or capture him."

"I am with you, for I confess I shall never rest easy until I learn for myself whether it was a man or a spirit I saw three nights ago."

"Well, we must find out; but did you see the man among the raiders at the river?"

"No, though I told you the chief's voice, as he gave orders, sounded familiar."

"Yes."

"It was just such a deep, yet commanding voice as Tiger Tom's."

"Then all the raiders must have been ghosts."

"No, they were real, and Tiger Tom may not have been their chief."

"You see he rode by me, coming from the river, and when I got to my home and attempted to follow I could not find the trace of a trail, even though I rode back among the mesquites."

"I felt braver when he was gone, but for the saving of my life I could never have raised my revolver and pulled trigger when I saw him."

"Well, if he was not killed, then he will be more fiendish than ever now, so we must be on the watch."

"He knows that Captain Hassan, Monte Joe and my League were along on the trail that penned him and his party up in his ranch, so he will doubtless be revengeful against all of us."

"Now you are well aware, Dave, that it was only a surmise of ours that Tiger Tom was the leader of a band of robbers."

"We got no actual proof, and after his death, or supposed death, we were forced to let the men at his ranch go their way, though we knew most of them as a lawless lot."

"The commandant of Fort S— took my version of the affair and decided that I was right, while it was agreed that the man I had the lasso duel with was Thomas Trescott, deserter from the —th Cavalry, United States Army, murderer and robber of the paymaster, and who went under the *alias* of Tiger Tom, and the Tiger of Texas."

"The reward offered upon his head, dead or alive, was paid, and you all got your shares, for I would not touch a dollar of it, as you know, under the circumstances."

"Yes, I know that, Buck, and I begin to fear the price was paid for a man who was not killed."

"So it looks to me, and it will be our duty now to catch or kill that man, to show our good intentions, or if dead, to prove it."

"Right you are, Cap'n Buck, and I'm with you to the death."

"I well know that, Derringer Dave."

"Well, what's to be done, Saddle King?"

"We will camp together to-night, and in the morning you are to go to Fort S— and get the men of my League who got their share of the reward on Tiger Tom's head."

"I also wish the remainder of my men to stay at Fort S—, ready for moving on the instant."

"But the others you are to take to Fort Roundtop and report to Colonel Forsythe, awaiting my return."

"And you, Cap'n Buck?"

"Well, I shall go upon a voyage of discovery."

"Which way, may I ask?"

"First, I shall go to Soldier's Retreat Ranch, the home of Captain Ned Hassan."

"I don't blame you, Saddle King, for he has the prettiest girl in the State of Texas for a daughter."

"That is not why I go, Dave," and Buck Taylor blushed like a schoolboy.

"It was the captain who examined Tiger Tom after the lasso duel, and pronounced him dead."

"I know."

"Now, he was surgeon in the army before he became a Texas ranchero, and there is no better man in Texas to decide upon a case of life and death, and I wish to ask him if there was any possibility of Tiger Tom's being alive, after all."

"I see."

"Then I shall go to Trail Crossing and see if Tiger Tom has been seen in his old haunts there, and tell Monte Joe just what you have discovered, and put him on the watch."

"If Tiger Tom is alive and goes back to Trail Crossing, he and Monte Joe are dead sure to have it out."

"You can bet big money on that, and that gambler is no man to fool with."

"No, he's a dangerous man when aroused, and true as steel to a friend."

"I like him immensely."

"He's as sweet-mannered as a woman, and can be as wild as a buzz-saw, Saddle King."

"Yes, and I wish to see him."

"Then I shall go to the Mission Ranch."

"Tiger Tom's?"

"Yes."

"See here, Saddle King, you are not going alone?"

"Yes; why not?"

"Well, I don't obey orders, for I go with you!"

"It will not be so risky."

"It will, and unless you get some of Captain Hassan's cowboys to go with you, not a step do I go toward the fort."

"I will do as you wish, Dave, and it will be best, for I do not know just what I may have to face there, especially as I shall open Tiger Tom's grave."

"Now you are talking, for if he's there, it's his ghost prowling about the earth."

"I shall almost believe it, Dave, if I find him in his grave; but we go into camp here for the night, and to-morrow we go our separate ways, for I promise you not to visit the Mission Ranch alone."

"That's a go," was Derringer Dave's reply, and soon after the two went into camp for the night, and the next morning went separate trails, for Buck Taylor started upon the duty of discovering whether the Tiger of Texas, or his ghost, was prowling about the prairies.

CHAPTER X.

AN OLD SOLDIER'S RANCH.

SOLDIER'S RETREAT RANCH, toward which Buck Taylor had started, after leaving Derringer Dave, was as comfortable a home as there was to be found in Texas, withal that it was upon the boundary line between civilization and savagery.

The "captain" had been a surgeon in the United States Army, and had when stationed at a fort on the Rio Grande, rescued a Mexican maiden from some kidnappers.

Thus the acquaintance began between handsome Surgeon Ned Hassan, and Marion Inglis, the beautiful Mexican girl, their course of love running so smoothly that they were married soon after.

Resigning from the army Ned Hassan became a ranchero, building himself a house, of logs, though it was, became the envy of every other ranchero, for its situation, commodiousness and attractiveness.

It was an abode of hospitality too, and its owner could count his cattle by thousands, his ponies by hundreds, and there were some thirty gallant cowboys belonging to the place who had their camp a couple of miles away and were devoted to the interests of their employer, his wife and daughter, for, as Derringer Dave had hinted, there was a daughter at Soldier's Retreat Ranch.

With a refined and lovely mother, a father who was a gentleman by birth and a soldier by training, Belle Hassan had been well reared and at sixteen was a beautiful and accomplished girl.

Her parents had been her teachers, and an accomplished woman herself, Mrs. Hassan had been most thorough in the training of her daughter, while her husband had seen to it that Belle was thoroughly educated in all prairie craft.

She could ride any horse a cowboy dare bestride, throw a lasso with unerring skill, and frequently worsted her father in dead-shots hooting with rifle and revolver.

In her early childhood Belle had been captured by Comanches, and taken a captive to their village along with others.

Among these was Buck Taylor, then a youth, and he had so well and daringly planned his escape, that when the time came for him to make the attempt he rescued little Belle Hassan also, and took her in safety to her parents' home.

It is needless to say that from that time Buck Taylor was ever a most welcome guest at the Hassan Ranch, and between Belle and himself there existed an attachment which was as sincere as a brotherly and sisterly love.

Captain Hassan, at the time this story opens,

was a fine-looking, well preserved man of forty-five.

He was every inch a soldier, fearless, whole-souled and a devoted husband and father.

His men, by courtesy called him captain, and he was ever ready to lend his services as a physician and surgeon when needed.

His wife, some eight years his junior was still very beautiful in face and form, hardly looking like the mother of a maiden of seventeen.

She possessed a fine voice, had a thorough musical education, and with her refined taste had done much to adorn her frontier home.

With her from Mexico had come nine peon servants from her old home, and they were most devoted to their mistress, master and "Missy Belle."

The latter possessed the dark, brilliant complexion of her mother, with eyes large, dreamy, yet with slumbering fire in their depths.

Her physical training had developed her fine form to perfection, and her father was often wont to say that her endurance was equal to any Comanche brave.

Such was the home and family of the ex-soldier, Ned Hassan, and a happy one it was.

The captain was getting rich fast, or rather adding to his riches, for he was already a wealthy man, and Belle was his sole heiress, so was looked upon as a prize worth striving for.

Belle was perfectly fearless in her nature, and was wont to mount one of her horses and ride at will alone across the prairies, sometimes going many miles from home.

She would always go around with her rifle, and never went without her belt of arms, while she carried a lasso also, a dangerous weapon, too, by the way, in her hands.

Game she would always bring in, and she was an expert and skillful fisherwoman, too, something strange for one of her sex, I am inclined to think.

Captain Hassan often accompanied his daughter on her rides and hunts, but proudly admitted that she was wont to get over too much ground in a day for him to follow her constantly.

The cowboys were devoted to her, and called her "Little Captain," "Girl Captain," and "Captain Belle," and her word was law to them.

Buck Taylor had given her the name of "Girl Pard," and she rather liked to be so called, and was wont to speak of him, ever since their captivity together among the Comanches, as "Brother Buck."

One afternoon Belle set out upon one of her accustomed jaunts.

She was well mounted upon a horse as fleet as a deer, and which was thoroughly trained to do the will of his mistress.

She was going along a valley, following the banks of a winding stream, when she suddenly saw a horseman ride into the trail ahead of her and halt.

She did not like his looks, so at once drew rein and turned to go back, when behind her, not a hundred yards away, she saw a horseman following her.

Then she knew that she had been tracked into a trap.

CHAPTER XI.

A GIRL AT BAY.

BELLE'S first thought was that she had come so far from home, and then she remembered, since the death of Tiger Tom the lawless element of the border had not been giving any trouble, and she certainly had not expected to meet any one to harm her.

But whatever her thoughts were, and her regret, there remained before her the fact that she was in a very tight place.

It could not be an accident, that she had been caught between these two men.

They were two much alike in looks, the desperado from heel to scalp, or they belied their appearance.

Then too the first man had seemed to ride out of an ambush, and he had halted at seeing her, or rather at her discovery of him.

The other man had halted when she turned about and discovered him.

The trail Belle had followed had come from the prairie into the hill-land and thus turned into the valley.

The men could have seen her from the hills, and taken position accordingly to head her off and follow her.

The stream she was following was risky, had a steep bank and one she could not ride down without taking desperate chances of breaking her own and her horse's neck.

On the right there was an open space, yet only for a short distance, as the hill broke off abruptly in a palisade she could not even have scaled on foot.

As the two horsemen remained still, Belle decided to end the suspense, so she turned quietly back, as that was the nearest way home, and rode toward the man who had been following her.

She glanced over her shoulder as she did so and discovered that the man who had barred her way was following her.

Belle set her lips in a determined way, and a dangerous light came into her eyes as she

dropped her hand upon her revolver, drew it quietly, and let it rest in her lap, hidden in the folds of her riding habit.

The man in front did not move, but awaited her approach, and the man in her rear came slowly on.

As she drew near the one who now barred her way, she determined not to go too close, so, halting fifty feet away, she called out:

"Why do you stand in my trail?"

"You is Cap'n Ned Hassan's carter, hain't yer?"

"Yes."

"Waal, times is goin' hard with me and my two pards, so we wants ter raise a leetle money."

"I have no money with me."

"Waal, you is wu'th yer weight in gold, I guesses, to yer pa."

"What do you mean?"

"I means that times bein' hard, we is goin' to raise a leetle dust by jist capturin' you, miss, and offerin' ter find yer fer ther sum o' a thousand or so fer each of us."

"How many of you are there?" was the cool query, for Belle's nerves grew stronger with her increasing danger.

"Thar be three of us."

"I see but two."

"T'other is 'round."

"Call him, for I wish to see first what I have got to fight."

"Ter fight?"

"Yes."

The man laughed rudely, while he asked:

"Does yer mean yer intends ter fight us, you, a leetle gal, a-goin' ter fight three men?"

"It is just what I do mean."

The girl's pluck and coolness nonplused the desperado, and he cried:

"Come up, pards, and show yer hands, fer I pass, as ther leetle gal holds too many trumps fer me."

The man whom Belle had first seen now rode up close to her on one side, and from the trail she had come approached the third man, the counterpart of the other two in looks, and as far as villainy went.

They were men who had a lawless look, men capable of any crime, and Belle saw that she need expect no mercy at their hands.

But her nerve did not forsake her, and she asked:

"Well, who are you, anyway?"

"Tramps on horseback, I guesses you might call us."

"The world is ag'in' us, and when we sees a chance fer a raise we grabs at it," said the man nearest her now, and who had been the first one she had seen.

"You saw me coming, decided to entrap me, and hold me for a ransom from my father?"

"Adzactly, and you is as cool as a norther about it."

"Why should I not be, for I have not the remotest idea of tamely submitting to you, if you are three to one, and I am a girl."

The three men laughed at this, for it seemed really funny to them that a young girl should stand at bay against them.

"You enjoy it, I see; but how are you going to capture me, for I am not a prisoner yet?"

"Waal, how yer kin see yer way out I don't know."

"Does you Nick?"

"I does not."

"No more does I."

Belle did not believe for an instant they would kill her, for that would be too great a crime even for them, and they would lose their expected ransom money by so doing.

So she made up her mind how to act, and to do it promptly.

She did not wish the life of any one upon her hands, so would not kill unless it came to a case of life and death.

To attempt to break through the two men toward home would hardly meet with success, she thought.

They were closer to her than the other horseman, and she might drop his horse and dash over him as he fell.

It would carry her away from home, but her horse was as fleet as a deer and she knew she could circle around at the head of the valley and thus reach the ranch, the way she had been going when brought to a halt.

She saw, too, that the last man to ride up held his lariat coiled in his hand, as though to catch her horse if she attempted to run.

So without showing any sign of her intention, she asked quietly:

"So you wonder how I am going to escape you do you?"

"We does," responded one answering for the three.

"Thus will I escape!" and with the words her revolver was leveled, her horse bounded forward and her finger drew trigger.

CHAPTER XII.

THE UNERRING LASSO.

THE sudden and daring act of Belle Hassan took the three desperadoes by surprise completely. They had not counted upon so bold a move upon her part.

Then, too, her horse had acted as though he

were part of herself, for at her words he had bounded forward straight toward where the one man barred the way.

And, raised like a flash from her lap, Belle's revolver had been leveled and the trigger pulled.

She had not aimed at the man, but the head of the horse.

Even at that moment she felt that it was sad to punish the innocent horse for the wicked rider, yet she was determined to make a brave effort to escape from the trap she had gotten into.

The bullet went where aimed, crashing into the head of the horse, which, drawn suddenly back by his startled rider, reared and fell backward among the rocks, crushing him beneath his weight.

With one mighty leap the horse of the young girl cleared the fallen animal and his rider, and went like a rocket down the trail.

But equally as quickly the man who held the lariat was in chase.

He was better mounted than his companions, and seemed not so thoroughly caught off his guard by the sudden act of one they deemed in their power.

His horse too cleared his fallen comrade, and realizing that he was going to be quickly distanced by the animal the girl rode, he gave his lasso a few quick whirls and launched it, just as his comrade, now also in pursuit, called out:

"I kin drop her horse with a bullet, pard."

"No! the fall might kill her," cried the other and he let go the coil as he spoke.

His aim was true and yet had he been five feet further away it would have fallen short.

Belle had cast a quick glance over her shoulder, and stooped low in her saddle as she saw his intention, thinking that she was the object of his aim.

But, instead, the noose settled over the neck of her horse, and as the lasso-thrower spurred his animal forward as he threw it, to prevent his straining himself back on his haunches, as trained bronchos will do, he kept on close behind the young girl.

He, however, drew the lariat as taut as he dared, and then called out:

"You are in my power, girl, so halt your horse or I will throw him!"

Belle turned in her saddle, her revolver in hand, but the man checked her shot just in time by calling out:

"If you kill me or my horse that does not set you free, girl!"

"Alas! too true!" cried Belle, as she knew the falling of the man's horse would throw her own, while if she shot the rider, the animal he rode would still have it in his power to dash away, or halt, and bring her own down, as one end of the lariat was fast to the saddle-horn, and the other taut about the neck of her own horse, now greatly frightened.

Then, too, the other mounted man was in hot chase and she had heard his threat to shoot her horse.

But still the nerve of the girl did not desert her, and she reached for the little knife she always carried, for like a flash she had decided upon a plan of escape.

She would draw her horse to a halt, in such a way as to bring the lariat against her so that she could cut it, and then, quick as a flash she would fire upon the man, for she was aroused now to the humor to kill in self-defense.

She knew her aim would not fail her, and she could handle weapons with the quickness of an expert, and dropping her revolver she would bring her rifle into requisition and open upon the other desperado, a couple of hundred feet in the rear of the one who held her in his grasp, as it were.

Her thoughts went like lightning, and her mind was made up to act, so she called out:

"To have you throw my horse here among the rocks would kill me, so I will come to a halt as soon as I can, only he is running away with me now."

"All right, draw him down as soon as you can, girl, for you've left one of my pards in a bad way back yonder."

Belle watched the trail ahead, and began to draw on the reins.

At a turn she could sever the lariat with her knife, as he came against her, and then she could act promptly, for the man had no weapon drawn, she saw, to drop her horse with, and if he was quicker to draw and fire than she was, she grimly thought he was welcome to what advantage he might gain.

But, suddenly, just as she was preparing to act, a horseman dashed out from a thicket; his revolver covered the desperado, while he shouted in a voice there was no mistaking:

"Hands up, pard!"

The desperado was fairly caught, for the stranger had spurred out from shelter not thirty feet from him; and the ruffian seemed to recognize him, too, and feel that there would be no mistake in his aim.

So, up went his hands, while the stranger wheeled alongside of him, and his horse keeping pace with the desperado's, he unfastened his belt of arms and slung them on his saddle-horn.

Then he as quickly released the lariat from the saddle-horn, while he called out:

"You are free, Miss Hassan, so check your horse when you can, while I look after these fellows."

As Belle's horse, who was beyond her control in his fright, sped on, the stranger drew his own animal and the one ridden by the desperado to a quick turn, and said sternly:

"Now, ride with me in chase of your pard there, or you are a dead man!"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE STRANGER.

THE coming of the strange horseman was too unexpected and sudden—his actions too prompt and determined to have his own way, for the man who held the horse of Belle Hassan in his lasso coil to either show resistance or even think of it.

He found himself running back with the stranger in full chase of his companion who had taken to flight as soon as he saw the tables were turned.

Their captive had escaped them, one comrade lay crushed beneath his horse, and, how badly hurt the second one did not know, while the third was in the toils of the one who had so suddenly appeared upon the scene.

As this was the situation the desperado who was free, without thought of resistance turned and fled as fast as he could go.

To add to his terror he saw, as he glanced back over his shoulder, that not only had his comrade been captured, but he was being forced to ride back in pursuit of himself, and the thought that he was now the game hunted caused him still greater dread.

Hampered as he was with his captive, and having to ride close to his side, with his lariat about the horse and the man's body, the stranger could not ride with the speed he wished, and so the flying desperado ahead was holding his own, though the horse he rode was not the equal of the others in speed.

As he reached the spot where they had halted the ranchero's daughter, the fugitive beheld lying there, held down by his dead horse, his comrade, who sung out lustily:

"Turn and fight him, Sandy! Don't be a fool and a coward too!"

"I didn't," was the reply and he was flying by when his comrade again called out:

"My leg is broken, and I can't git out from under this beast. Stand by me, Sandy!"

But, Sandy had only his own safety in view and spurred his horse still more fiercely.

Then there came the clatter of hoofs behind and Belle Hassan rushed on like the very wind.

"Ah! Miss Hassan, just guard my prisoner for me, please, and I will soon overtake that fellow," cried the stranger.

"No, Monte Joe, I will capture the ruffian myself!" and the ranchero's daughter went by like a shot upon her matchless horse, in full chase of the fugitive desperado.

"Brave girl! be careful," cried the man she had called Monte Joe, and who at once drew to a halt, right by the third man who was held down by his dead horse.

Throwing the lariat in coils around the prisoner, and drawing them uncomfortably taut, he thus secured him in his saddle, and dismounting hitched his horse to a tree.

In a moment of time he was away after Belle and the fugitives, who were now some distance ahead.

The fleeing Sandy saw that the fleet horse of the young girl was gaining upon him, and that she held her revolver in her hand, so he decided upon a plan to get that horse.

He also noticed that Monte Joe had halted, and quickly he drew rein and threw up his hands.

"I surrenders, miss!" he called out as Belle came dashing up.

His plan was to at once seize her, throw her from the saddle, and, taking her horse, make good his escape from Monte Joe; but the villain counted upon Belle's doing just as he wished for the success of his plot.

She was not to be deceived so easily, however, for she had been well trained in the cunning of border outlaws.

She halted suddenly, twenty feet away from the ruffian, and at the same instant throwing her rifle to her shoulder, called out:

"Hold your hands up, sir, until Monte Joe comes!"

The desperado swore audibly, for he had been snared in his own trap.

Belle's horse, again under her control, now stood like a statue, and that she would miss her man the outlaw knew was not to be thought of; so he could but obey, and his face became livid as he saw Monte Joe coming rapidly along the trail toward them.

"Say, miss, Monte Joe will hang me, fer he's ther wust man in ther settlements ter r'ile," he whined.

"You should have thought of that before you tried to capture me," was the girl's retort.

"If he has me hanged, I'll haunt yer, gal, I will—day and night."

"I am not afraid of ghosts," was Belle's smile.

ing rejoinder, and just then Monte Joe dashed up.

"You've got him, Miss Hassan. I congratulate you," and he laid his hand heavily upon the shoulder of the terribly frightened desperado.

"Yes; he sought to play a trick by surrendering, but I saw his revolver in his upraised hand, so concluded to halt at a distance and thwart him."

"He'll try no more such games after I get him to Trail Crossing," assured Monte Joe, disarming and binding the prisoner with his own lariat.

"Now he's safe, so we will return and bag the rest of the wolves. This is a very good day's hunt, Miss Hassan, and I must congratulate you upon your nerve."

"And I must thank you for saving me from those three outlaws, Monte Joe, though thanks but illy express my gratitude to you," responded Belle as they rode back toward the spot where Monte Joe had left his other prisoner and his wounded comrade.

CHAPTER XIV.

WHO WAS MONTE JOE?

No man upon the Texas border was better known than Monte Joe the gambler.

He had come to Texas from no one knew where, and that he was a gentleman in his bearing toward others and his behavior, his worst enemy would frankly admit.

He claimed to be just what he was, a gambler by profession, and with no other calling, but that he played a square game, all assented, while his luck was phenomenal.

"Lucky as Monte Joe," was an expression of comparison well known all along the border.

And pure luck it was, with an iron nerve, a daring way of playing against odds, and winning a game by a bluff.

Monte Joe was as handsome a man as could be found anywhere, dressed with taste, though perhaps a little given to foppishness.

He did not wear his belt of arms in sight, as others did, but that he had them had been demonstrated more than once.

He wore his hair long, and his mustache, long and silken, half covered a mouth that was very attractive, fearless and resolute, with just the shadow of a cynical smile upon it.

A man of superior education, his rooms, the best in the hotel, were filled with choice books, while he subscribed to a number of papers from all parts of the country, and read them diligently.

He was a general favorite, and yet he was dreaded by men who feared the law, from some reason they themselves could not understand.

There was not a poor person in the settlements whom Monte Joe was not always aiding in some way, and he would never play cards with a man who was intoxicated, or too poor to stand a loss.

No one had ever seen him excited, and his nerve was well known, and his decision for or against was always sure to settle a dispute.

If he had other name than Monte Joe, no one had yet been able to discover it, for he was thus registered upon the books of the hotel, and his letters, packages of books, papers and clothes all came addressed simply to the cognomen by which he was known at Trail Crossing.

When Buck Taylor had first met Tiger Tom, and visited Trail Crossing and found him there, Monte Joe had sided with the Saddle King in the attempt of the ranchero desperado's friends to rescue him, and the cowboy chief had gone off with his prisoner for the fort.

That he had been rescued from him afterward was no fault of Monte Joe's, and he had willingly joined the Saddle King on the hunt for the Tiger of Texas, which had ended in the duel between the two with lassoes, a duel which, as has been said, was fatal to the ranchero, or supposed to be, until Derringer Dave had reported that either the man or his ghost had been seen by him prowling the plains.

In the hunt for the Tiger of Texas Monte Joe had visited Soldier's Retreat Ranch with Buck Taylor, and there met Belle Hassan for the first time.

He had been warmly welcomed by Captain Hassan and his wife, for his character as a man was well known, whatever his profession as a gambler might be.

The wit, beauty and majestic nature of Belle Hassan had caused the gambler to admire her immensely, while her pluck and accomplishments indoor and out surprised him greatly.

Their second meeting had been when the gambler again stopped at Soldier's Retreat Ranch, on his return to Trail Crossing, after the lasso duel between Buck Taylor and the Tiger of Texas.

Their third meeting was nearly a half-year after, and when Monte Joe had so unexpectedly and fortunately appeared upon the scene in the valley, when Belle so sadly needed his aid.

As he had before told her, that he was known only as Monte Joe the gambler, she could call him by that name alone.

Having now made the reader acquainted with the rescuer of Belle Hassan, and the man whom Buck Taylor had told Derringer Dave he was going to see, I will continue the scene in the valley.

ley when the gambler and the young girl rode up to where the other two outlaws had been left.

As they rode along, Belle explained how she had ridden into the trap, the outlaws having seen her as she came across the prairie, and placed themselves in position upon the trail to head her off.

"You are a brave girl, Miss Hassan, and I verily believe you would have escaped, by the clever dodge you were preparing to play, had I not been near."

"But I saw those fellows lying in wait for some one, as I was in camp under the Palisades, and I prepared to discover just what they were about."

"I am glad I was near; though, as I said, I believe you would have extricated yourself from the trouble."

"Now, here we are, and I wish to see how badly this man is hurt."

"Is it not strange that you missed him, for you are a dead shot, as I know?"

"I did not wish his life on my hands, so fired to kill his horse."

"Ah! so your aim was true."

"But your leg is not broken, Spalding, only bruised, and you can get up behind Nick, or Sandy, as you please."

"You know them, then, Monte Joe?" said Belle.

"Oh, yes, I have often seen the three of them in Trail Crossing, and they are a bad, dangerous trio."

"I was on my way to Fort S—, Miss Hassan, to see Buck Taylor, but I will go back to your ranch, and turn these men over to your father's keeping," said Monte Joe.

"That means that we hang," groaned Sandy to his comrades, as the three prisoners, mounted two on one horse, were led off by Monte Joe, who rode ahead with Belle Hassan.

CHAPTER XV.

BRANDED.

THE man upon whom his horse had fallen, when shot by Belle Hassan, was not seriously hurt, though considerably bruised.

As he could not get his leg out from beneath his horse, he believed it broken, and though he pretended to be very badly injured, Monte Joe knew that he was in a measure shamming, and that it would not do to trust him.

The weapons of the three men were hung upon the saddle-horn of the gambler, and two of the men were securely bound to their horses, the one who was hurt simply having a lariat bound about his waist and securing him to the one behind whom he rode.

"We is goners, sartain!" whispered one as they came along behind the gambler and Belle.

"It do look black fer us," said another.

"Quit your croaking and keep your eyes open for a chance to escape, for we are not hanged yet," sternly said the man who had been the one to capture Belle's horse.

Thus the party rode on, the young girl conversing pleasantly with the gambler, whom she could not but wonder should lead the life he did when so well fitted to be an ornament in society and carve out an honorable name for himself.

There was something strangely fascinating to Belle in this gentleman gambler.

The very mystery surrounding him increased her interest, and she wondered why it was that he did not allow her to know him by other name than that of Monte Joe.

After a ride of two hours, Soldier's Retreat Ranch came in sight, and as they neared the attractive frontier home, Belle said:

"Father has company, for there is some one on the piazza with him and mamma."

A few moments after, as the party on the piazza arose at seeing them coming, she cried, joyfully:

"Oh, see! Monte Joe, it is Brother Buck!"

"You are right, Miss Hassan, it is the Saddle King, and I am fortunate indeed to have returned with you."

"With the prisoners, you mean, but it's an ill wind that does not blow somebody good, if that's the right quotation, Monte Joe."

"Now we is hanged sure, for thar be Buck Taylor," groaned Sandy to his companions.

"Yas, Monte Joe war bad enough, but ther Lasso King is wuss," averred another, while the man who appeared to be the leader seemed to have also given up hope, as he remained silent.

Up to the piazza steps rode Monte Joe, Belle and their prisoners, and warm salutations were exchanged, while Captain Hassan called out:

"But, who have you there, Monte Joe?"

"Oh, papa! these men waylaid me, and but for Monte Joe's coming would have kidnapped me."

The face of Captain Hassan grew dark with anger, while his wife said anxiously:

"My child! you must not go off on these long rides alone, for you will yet meet with peril when no one is near to aid you."

"What do we not owe to you, sir?" and Monte Joe promptly responded:

"Miss Belle does not state it correctly, begging her pardon. These men did waylay her, but she shot the horse of one, putting him out

of the affair, and dashed by another in her escape, when her horse was lassoed."

"Yet there is no doubt but that she would have gotten away without my coming, which was fortunate in that we were able to capture those three scoundrels, whom you may recognize, Buck?"

"Yes, I have seen them in Trail Crossing, and if they are not villains their faces belie them," Buck Taylor responded.

"Have you not seen them elsewhere, Buck?" significantly asked the gambler.

"Yes, I think they were pards of Tiger Tom; but I will soon know."

He quickly descended the steps, and, approaching one of the men, by a deft movement turned his left hand over.

Then he went to the other two mounted upon the one horse and grasped the left hand of one of the men.

This he let go, after a quick glance, and the third man clinched his fist and resisted with all his might the opening of his hand. He was the leader of the three.

"Open your hand, sir, or I'll sever the sinews," sternly threatened Buck Taylor, drawing his sharp bowie-knife and holding it ready, while all regarded his actions with surprise.

"You have the power, for I am a prisoner, so I obey," returned the man in a voice hoarse with passion.

He opened his hand and after a glance at the palm, Buck Taylor said:

"It is as I supposed, Captain Hassan; they wear the brand."

"Ah! a double reason, then, for their punishment. I will send them to the cowboys' camp by Tonto the peon, for safe keeping," responded Captain Hassan.

"To the cowboys' camp, father, for safe keeping?" repeated Belle, with surprise.

"Yes, my child."

"The cowboys will put them in a prison from which there is no escape—the grave," impressively said Belle.

"The men need not know their crime, Belle, but simply be told to hold them prisoners, for they shall be sent to Trail Crossing for trial."

"They'll hang us fust and then try us," Sandy whined.

So Tonto was called and he led the horses off toward the camp of the cowboys, two miles distant down the stream, and then Monte Joe was welcomed again to the ranch, while he told Buck Taylor that he had been on his way by the lower trail to Fort S— to seek him, when, while resting in his noonday camp he had seen the three outlaws, and watching them, had soon discovered what their game was.

CHAPTER XVI.

TONTO THE PEON.

TONTO, the peon, was one who had come with Mrs. Hassan to Texas, giving up his home in Mexico to follow her fortunes, as did also Lulu, his wife, and several others of their race.

The peon was one who could be thoroughly trusted, and yet the three outlaws smiled blandly as he mounted his pony and rode off with them, the sole guard, on a two-mile tramp.

Night was coming on, and as they rode out of the gate into the prairie, the leader said in Spanish:

"You are a Mexican, Tonto?"

"I was, senior; but I am a Texan now."

"You are to take us to the cowboys' camp?"

"Yes, senior."

"What for?"

"The Senior Captain told me to do so, senior."

"What have we done?"

"I do not know, senior."

"What will the cowboys do with us?"

"I do not know, senior."

"Well, we have done nothing but give that pretty girl a scare, and we were set upon by that gambler, Monte Joe, and brought here."

"The captain is not a man to stand any one trifling with, Seniorita Belle, senior."

"We meant her no harm, and I fear we will be hanged by those crazy cowboys of the ranch, for I have heard they are a bad lot."

"They are brave men, senior, and true to the captain."

"Now don't you wish to go back to Mexico?"

"Some day I may do so, senior, to see my kindred."

"You are not rich, Tonto?"

"No, senior, but I have a few hundred pesos laid by."

"Now, I have got with me about four hundred pesos, and my comrades have about half that sum each, and every dollar we will give to you, if you can let us tie you to your pony, stake him out yonder in the timber, and go our way."

"No, senior."

"Say, pards, this is a case where money is no good if we are hanged, so chip in liberally and give all to Tonto here."

"How much have you, Nick?"

"About three hundred and fifty dollars, pard."

"And you, Sandy?"

"I've got that much, if not a leetle more."

"And I can raise nearly five hundred, so, Tonto, you see what you can have to let us go, though we will have to take your pony, too."

"No, senior."

"Now, Monte Joe did not search my pard there, so you can say, as you see he is not so tightly bound, being hurt, that he got his arms loose, drew a revolver from an inside pocket and held you up."

"Then we tied you, took your horse, and got away."

"When you are found we will be far off, and, as it is night, even Buck Taylor cannot trail us."

"I'll give you the money the moment you set us free, and you can hide it away before we tie you, so as to have nothing about you. See?"

"No, senior, I will not be tempted."

"Say, Sandy, you and Nick have got more money than you say, only you do not wish to give it up."

"Now I confess I have got a clear thousand with me, and I'll give it all, and I believe you have each got as much as I have."

"I owns up, pard, I has, and it goes for liberty," said Nick.

"And me too, for money hain't no good if we is hanged," Sandy added.

"You hear, Tonto, so you will get three thousand dollars?"

"It's a fortune, senior, for a poor peon, but nothing would tempt me to go against the captain's orders," was the response of the honest peon.

The men looked at each other in blank dismay.

Between them there were not fifty dollars all told, but the leader had plotted to get free, and then poor Tonto would have been knocked on the head and left in the timber, while they, free if unarmed, would have taken his horse and escaped.

But Tonto was not to be tempted, poor peon that he was, and so safely conducted the prisoners on to the cowboys' camp.

The camp was delightfully located in a bend of the stream, with plenty of timber near.

Though called a camp, it was more of a village, as there were a dozen snugly-built cabins built in a crescent, and both commodious and comfortable.

The position was well chosen, as it brought into view on each side of the little river, many miles of prairie land, where the large herds of cattle and ponies could be kept under the eyes of the cowboys.

There was a large corral on the stream lower down, where the cattle could be driven in case of a raid of Indians, and a better body of men to guard his herds and interests, Captain Hassan did not wish.

They were wild riders, all of them, free-hearted, daring fellows, dead shots, unerring lariat-throwers and a peaceable lot except when put on the war-path after Comanches or lawless raiders.

"Well, Tonto, who have you got there?" asked Rio Grande Rob, the fine looking chief of the ranch cowboy band, and who stood six feet in moccasins.

"The Senior Captain sent me over with these three men for you to take care of for him, senior," was Tonto's reply, as he rode up with his prisoners, around whom the cowboys then in camp and off duty quickly gathered.

"They are an ugly lot, Tonto."

"What have they been up to?" asked Rio Grande Rob.

"I don't know, senior, for I did not hear."

"The senior only told me to bring them to you to keep."

"Oh, we'll do it, Tonto, say to the captain, and when he wants them he'll find them safe."

"We hain't done nothin'," said Sandy.

"They offered me three thousand pesos to let them escape, senior," said Tonto, as he turned away.

"Oh they did, did they, and yet they have done nothing."

"You must be rich, pards, to offer so much."

"We didn't offer it, for we hain't got no money," Sandy said as Tonto had ridden out of hearing.

"Well, as the captain wishes us to keep you in safety, we'll do it."

"Larry put them in the jug," and Rio Grande Rob nodded toward a log hut which was the guard-house of the ranch.

CHAPTER XVII.

WILLING TO BE BRIBED.

THE "jug" was a hard place to get out of even if one had his arms free and tools to work with.

It was built of logs of the stoutest kind, welded together at the corners, and the ceiling and floor were the same, it being in fact a log-box.

The windows were narrow slits cut in the logs one on each side, and the door swung upon four massive hinges from the top, lowered and raised by a rope and pulley from without, where it was fastened with iron bolts.

There was a roof over the top, some bunks along the sides, a table and benches.

Into this place the three prisoners were put, with their arms freed from the bonds, but manacles put upon their ankles.

A cowboy was put upon guard without, and it was his place to walk around the building at will, while he would be relieved by another man

in four hours, for the company of cowboys upon the Hassan Ranch were as well organized as a military company and conducted matters very much as they would had they been enlisted men in the United States Army.

Night came on, and soon after the guard approached one of the apertures called windows.

"I say," he called out in a whisper.

"Well," assured Baldy, the leader of the trio, in a gruff voice.

"Don't give me away by talking so loud, but come here."

Baldy obeyed the summons, and said:

"Well, here I am."

"Tonto the peon said you had offered him three thousand pesos to git away."

"Well, what if we did?"

"Hain't one man as good as another ter earn it?"

"Yes, and one man is as good as another to pay it to."

"So says I."

"What have you got to propose?"

"Sh! there comes one of the boys."

A step was heard without, and a voice called out:

"Watch 'em close, Ben, for they are a bad lot. Rio Grande Rob has just come back from the ranch and heard what they did."

"I'll watch 'em," was the answer, followed by the question:

"What did they do?"

"You'll be told when you come off duty," and the prisoners heard retreating footsteps, as they had overheard all that had been said.

"Say, pard, what did yer do?" asked the cowboy in the same whispered tone in which he had before spoken.

"You help us out and we'll give you the three thousand we promised the peon, and you'll know when you go off duty."

"No, I won't, for I'll go with you, as I don't want to hang."

"That's so."

"And I'll get you the best horses in the outfit, if I decide to help yer out."

"Well, you can get the money, and more too, if you are willing to take the risk."

"What ter do?"

"Could you get the captain's daughter away from the house in any way, do you think?"

"I guess so, if I told her the boys wanted ter make her pa a present, and didn't wish him ter know it, until he found it in the morning."

"Good! well, if you can help us out you get your three thousand dollars, and more, if you can then get the girl away from the house, so we can kidnap her; why, the captain will pay big money to get her back, and if he don't pay our price the Comanches may have her."

"It's risky, but I guess it's worth trying for."

"Was that what you was up ter?"

"Yes, we were coming to shadow the ranch, to capture her, when she rode right upon us, you see; but she was a hard one to rope in if she is a girl, and she is as game as a Comanche, and pretty nearly made us shoot her in self-defense, for she can handle a revolver splendidly."

"Yes, she's a young tiger, and I just wants ter git even with her once," said the cowboy.

"Well, you can do it, if you will help us out."

"I'll see how things are, but I want more pay than the three thousand."

"We have not got a dollar more."

"I'll take the balance in revenge," savagely said the cowboy.

"What revenge?"

"Waal, the gal refused me, and what she suffers will be my revenge on her; but her father, when I asked him ter let me marry her, insulted me in the meanest way, and I'd like to put a bullet in him."

"Then we wouldn't get our ransom."

"It's the mother has got the money, and she'd pay more than he would to git her darter back, if her husband was kilt."

"Say you'll do it, and run off with the gal, besides giving me my three thousand, and I'll slip away and get the horses ready, steal weapons from the armory where they was put, and be back here in half an hour."

"We will do it, but we will need all the time we can get, for both Buck Taylor and Monte Joe are up at the ranch and they are bad men to follow on a trail."

"I'll be back soon as I can," answered the cowboy, and he slipped away from the window, while two other forms, whose presence there the prisoners had not suspected, glided off in the darkness too.

As the three reached the cabin of Rio Grande Rob, the cowboy captain, one was seen to be that individual himself, and the other was the other guard selected to guard the prisoners.

"Well, cap'n, you heard how they gave themselves away?" said Ben quietly.

"Yes, Ben, your plot was a good one, for now we know just what they did, and we can act accordingly."

"Why those fellows would do just as they said, if they got the chance."

"But they won't get the chance," he added significantly.

"Call the men together!" was the order that then came from his lips, and there was an ugly look gleaming in his dark eyes.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A COWBOY COURT OF JUSTICE.

WITHIN the time he had said Ben the cowboy guard was again back at his post by the window, and he said:

"Here I is, pards."

"Yes; are the horses ready?"

"Yas, they are right down behind the cabin, and I has a pard who is goin' with us, so I sent him to git the gal to slip out to ther gate to meet some of the boys as wanted ter let her inter ther secret of givin' her father a present, don't yer see?"

"But can you trust your pard?"

"You bet, and we can ride right up and capture her, as she will have no suspicion."

"I see. Well, come in and set us free."

"Where is my money, first?"

Turning to his comrades, Baldy said:

"Get out your money, pards."

Then he continued:

"Come right in and you shall have it, every dollar she promised you."

"All right," and Ben went to the little windlass that pulled the heavy log door up, and began work upon it.

It seemed to be slow and hard work, but the door slowly moved inward from the bottom, and at last rose to a height of three feet from the ground.

"It's tough work, pards, so that is enough," he said, panting from his exertions, and he added:

"Now, the money, if you please?"

"Come in and get it."

In he crawled to suddenly drop upon his face as a heavy blow fell upon his head.

"Take his knife from his belt, Sandy, and put it into his heart," said Baldy, in a low tone.

But ere this order could be carried out the cowboy was suddenly dragged back from the door by some force from without, and a stern voice cried:

"Back, you devils, to your corners!"

A lantern then flashed into the guard-house, the door was raised to the full height, and into the place stepped Rio Grande Rob, while at his back were a number of his men.

"So this is your game, is it?" he said, sternly, gazing upon the three desperadoes who had shrunk back in terror to their corners.

"Well, Ben told me he could make you give yourselves away, and his game was well played and won."

"But that I made him put a pad under his hat that blow that you gave him on the back of his neck would have killed him, and as it was it half stunned him."

"Boys, come in, all of you, for these men have shown their red hands and must be tried now, without delay."

"Tried? You don't expect us to get justice from a lot of cowboy cut-throats such as you are?" fiercely said Baldy, who was now fully aware of their desperate condition.

"Yes; you will get just as much justice from this cowboy court as you would tried before a judge in Galveston."

"Men, I wish you to hear Ben's story, and then decide, not hastily, but in justice, what punishment should be meted out to these men."

"We'll do it," came in a chorus, and it had an ominous sound to the three men, who now felt how cleverly they had been trapped by Cowboy Ben, who was so willing to accept a bribe, and win revenge upon his employer and his daughter.

The men came in silently and arranged themselves around three sides of the hut.

They were a splendid lot of fellows, some thirty in number, but their usually good spirits were silenced now, their faces being stern, for they fairly idolized their "Girl Captain," and felt the insult upon her more keenly than had it been an injury to themselves.

The three prisoners had shrunk back to the bunks at one end of the cabin, and Rio Grande Rob and Cowboy Ben took their seats at the table, facing them.

Ben had escaped death simply by his hat hiding the pad he had put on his head, expecting some treachery, and to ward off a blow should he receive one.

The blow had been dealt with a bench, which Baldy held over him, and it fell heavily enough to have crushed his skull or broken his neck, but for the precaution taken.

"Now, Ben, here is the Bible, and I wish to ask you to put your hand upon the sacred book and swear that all you will state now will be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth," said Rio Grande Rob, impressively.

"I do so swear, so help me God!" and Ben kissed the book in token also of his intention to tell only the truth.

"Now state just what your plot was, and what you discovered by it."

"Well, pards, when I was detailed as guard, the idea struck me to find out just what these men had been doing, and I told Captain Rob about it."

"He agreed, and sent Dick Soley to say something to me and pretend that the captain had

just returned from the ranch and had heard the whole story."

Then Ben went on to tell of his discovery of the guilt of the men, the plot they had entered into with him, and the promises made him.

"Now, Ben, search those men and see what money they have."

The closest search revealed but forty dollars on the trio, and Baldy had most of that.

"Now, men, you have heard and seen for yourselves, so I wish to ask you individually to name the punishment to be visited upon these men, whom you know to be guilty, as Ben has testified."

"I will give my decision on the result."

Then Rio Grande Rob asked the first man in the row:

"What is the punishment to be meted out to these men, Doc?"

"Hang 'em!" was the laconic response.

"Next! what do you say, Bailey?"

"Death!"

And so it went on until all were asked the question.

"It is unanimously decided that you hang, men, so thus you must die, and you have but one hour to make your peace with Heaven," and these words from the lips of Rio Grande Rob settled the doom of the three prisoners, for from the cowboy court there was no appeal.

CHAPTER XIX.

IN DOUBT.

A PLEASANT party sat down to supper that night in the Hassan home, for the hearts of the host and hostess were glad at the escape of their loved daughter, and they were full of gratitude to the gambler who had counted no odds in going to Belle's rescue.

Belle had told the whole story, just as it had occurred, and they could all understand that her chances of escape were indeed desperate had not Monte Joe appeared upon the scene, in spite of his protestations to the contrary.

Tonto had reported the delivery of the three men into the care of Rio Grande Rob, and that he had made no statement of why they were held.

"It is better so, for did they know, Belle, that they had tried to kidnap you they would hang them before morning," Captain Hassan said.

"Yes, and that would be terrible, wicked as they are, for I wish them to be sent to the town and lodged in jail, but not killed," answered Belle.

Tonto had also told the captain of the bribe offered him, and this had been repeated to the others, and then the three outlaws were dismissed, and other topics discussed.

Monte Joe proved himself conversant with all the latest news, and was most entertaining, while Buck Taylor told of the new military post that had been established, and that he and his men were to be stationed there.

"It will give us far better chances for moving, should the Comanches go on the war-trail, and if the outlaws attempt a raid, we will be that much nearer to head them off, so I rather like the change," Buck had said.

He had arrived at the Soldier's Retreat Ranch only an hour before Monte Joe and Belle, on his way to Trail Crossing to see the gambler.

Not a word did he say of why he was going, and that there was a doubt of the death of Tiger Tom, for he feared he would cause alarm to Mrs. Hassan.

But when the mother and daughter had retired to their rooms, leaving the captain and his guests together, Buck Taylor said:

"Monte Joe, have you any idea of why I was going to see you?"

"I think I can guess, Buck."

"Why?"

"From the same motive that was carrying me to Fort S— to see you."

"And that was—"

"Well, I took the trail just to come by here, then something led me to turn off from it to the one that carried me through the Mesquite Valley, for you know we have these impulses sometimes?"

"Yes, and thank Heaven that you did, for you saved my child by so doing, by following that impulse, Monte Joe," the captain said, fervently.

"Yes, I was fortunate to go that way."

"But, Buck, I wished to see you, and after I had done so, get you to return with me as far as Soldier's Retreat Ranch, for a talk with Captain Hassan, upon the subject of my going, and how strange a coincidence it is that my going should have been instrumental in aiding Miss Hassan, and meeting you here also."

"Yes, and your motive for seeing me, Monte Joe?"

"I am going to surprise Captain Hassan, I know, though I believe you know my motive."

"But do you believe Tiger Tom is dead?"

"As dead as a scalped Indian," the captain said earnestly before Buck Taylor could reply.

"Well, I do not, Captain Hassan."

"You are wrong, Monte Joe."

"Why do you think so?"

"I do not think, I know Tiger Tom is dead," was the decided response.

"Please give me your reasons, Captain Hassan, for your decision."

"Well, you saw the duel between Tiger Tom and Buck?"

"Yes."

"You saw Buck's lariat catch him around the neck?"

"I did."

"Buck wheeled and spurred away, as Tiger Tom's horse bounded off in fright, dragging the man heavily to the ground."

"Very true."

"Before Buck checked his horse he had dragged the man twenty feet."

"And you say he was dead?"

"My dear sir, his neck was broken by the lariat's drag on him, and he had no pulse whatever when I examined him, and his heart was utterly still."

"You are sure the neck was broken, sir?"

"Positive, for did you not see as much when he was put on the litter for the men to carry up to the ranch?"

"I thought so, sir."

"You speak in doubt now?"

"Well, Captain Hassan, I have seen a dozen men who have met Tiger Tom since his—well, say death."

"Impossible!"

"So I said, sir, and yet men have seen him whose word I would no more doubt than I would yours, or Buck's."

"Where did they see him?"

"In Trail Crossing, sir."

"When?"

"Several times."

"But you did not see him?"

"No, for I was not in Trail Crossing at the time; but he came in, so it is said, late one night, went to the tavern, then to the gambling saloon, putting his horse first in the stable."

"Then he left the saloon, after getting a drink, and going to the stable mounted his horse and rode away."

"Tiger Tom?"

"Yes, sir."

"It was some man who closely resembled him."

"Two such men, Captain Hassan, are not to be found in the same State," said the gambler, in a tone that showed Captain Hassan that he believed that the giant desperado yet lived.

CHAPTER XX.

A MYSTERY TO BE FATHOMED.

CAPTAIN HASSAN shook his head in a thoughtful manner, when he had heard what Monte Joe had had to say about Tiger Tom, and then asked:

"Do you know the men who saw him?"

"The landlord, the negro at the stable, and a score of men who were in the saloon the night he was there, not to speak of the barkeeper who gave him his drink, putting up the bottle as he always did for Tiger Tom, with no glass."

"And he drank from the bottle?"

"He did, sir, all that was in the bottle too, just as Tiger Tom was wont to do."

"Then he threw a bill upon the bar, got his change and was turning away, when Will Watson spoke to him, calling him by his name."

"He answered Watson?"

"Yes, sir, for Watson said to him:

"I thought you had been killed by Buck Taylor, Tiger Tom."

"Them as told yer so, lied, for I'm neither a dead man or a ghost," was his answer, and he left the saloon."

"This is remarkable; but how was he dressed?"

"In his undress uniform jacket, top-boots, sombrero, and armed, just as Tiger Tom always was dressed and wearing the four revolvers as he did in his belt."

"I admit you amaze me, Monte Joe, for I would this minute take an oath that the man was dead."

"It seems not, sir, from the evidence."

"But was the man they saw as large as Tiger Tom?"

"His exact size and looked like him in face, hair and form."

"I confess I cannot understand it, Monte Joe."

"Nor I, sir, and when I had heard what every man had to say, taking all the evidence I could procure, I decided to go and notify Buck Taylor, who seems too much amazed to speak," and Monte Joe smiled.

"Yes, Buck, what do you think of this?" asked Captain Hassan turning to the Saddle King who had not spoken during the gambler's story of the discovery made in Trail Crossing.

"I agree with Monte Joe, sir."

"That Tiger Tom is alive?"

"Yes, sir."

"You know then the men who saw him, as Monte Joe does?"

"I knew nothing of his having been seen in Trail Crossing, Captain Hassan, until hearing Monte Joe tell of it just now."

"But I was on my way to Trail City to see Monte Joe and stopped here to see you, just to hear what you had to say in the way of proof that Tiger Tom was dead, for he has been seen upon the lower prairies."

"Do you mean it, Buck?" cried Monte Joe quickly.

"I will tell you all that I knew about it, and you can judge what to believe or not."

"I had orders some time since to select a site for a new military post."

"I selected Roundtop Hill, and it was taken possession of a month ago by Colonel Forsythe and his command."

"Then I had orders to go from Fort S—— and report to Colonel Forsythe who had sent for me."

"I went and found him a most perfect soldier and gentleman, and he told me to get my League of Lasso-Throwers and report to him for duty, as the Comanches were getting very uneasy and bold, and the outlaws from Mexico had raided several of the ranches."

"He further hinted that Tiger Tom's band was again on the trail, and I am to do the tracking down with my brave boys."

"Then I set out for Fort S—— to meet Derringer Dave coming after me."

"You both know him, and that he was not, to use an old saying, 'born in the woods to be scared of an owl!'"

"He is as plucky a fellow as I ever saw," Monte Joe said.

"Yes, I remember him, and he struck me as a man with a very level head," Captain Hassan remarked.

"He was one of the bearers of the body of Tiger Tom up to the ranch, when I delivered it to his wife," added Monte Joe.

"That is the same man, and he it was who came after me to Roundtop, or rather was on the way there when I met him as I was returning to Fort S——."

"Now he asked me if I believed in ghosts, and if I felt sure that Tiger Tom was dead."

"At last I learned from him that some of my men, he among the number, had followed the raiders on the settlement and Derringer Dave had gone on ahead to the river."

"There he found that the raiders got across the river with their stolen plunder and cattle, and he was returning to where he had left his horse when he happened to look back on the trail and saw a horseman coming."

"He crouched among the mesquites and got his revolver ready; but he was too paralyzed with fear to use it, for the man he saw was none other than Tiger Tom."

"Wonderful!" said Captain Hassan.

"I am glad of the proof to help out my story," Monte Joe remarked.

"Derringer Dave then said if I killed Tiger Tom, it was his ghost he saw; but if I did not kill him, it was the man himself."

"After all I had heard I decided to seek you, Captain Hassan, and find out just what you thought of the man's having been killed, or not killed, and then I was going to you, Monte Joe, to discover if Tiger Tom had been seen or heard of about Trail Crossing."

"Well, he has been seen there, and so must be alive."

"And I say that the man was surely dead; but it is a mystery that must be fathomed, Buck, and I am with you heart and hand to go to the bottom of it," Captain Hassan said.

"As I am also, Buck," was Monte Joe's rejoinder.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE PRISONERS' ESCAPE.

THE more the three men talked over the mystery hanging about Tiger Tom, the ranchero of Mission Ranch, the more they were mystified.

The price set on the man's head, as the murderer of an army paymaster, his robbery and then the desertion, had been paid, for Captain Graham and Monte Joe had gone to Fort S—— after the lasso duel and reported the certain death of the desperado.

And now this man, whose match in size and appearance had never been met with before in Texas, was said to be alive.

So it was that the three decided to go upon the morrow to Trail Crossing to discover all they could about Tiger Tom's appearance there, and to see if he had again been seen.

"Then I shall go to Mission Ranch," Buck Taylor said in his decided way.

"Why, he would not be found there, Buck, surely."

"No, captain, but his grave is there."

"Ah! You would open it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, it would tell the story, for no other body could be put there that would not at once betray the fact that it was not that of Tiger Tom."

"His height and size would tell that," Monte Joe said.

"Yes, so to the ranch we go, if you will accompany I mean?"

"Certainly, Buck, and I'll have a good dozen of my cowboys within easy call," said the captain.

"We may need them; but what is to be done with those scamps you have in the guard-house, captain, at the Cowboys Camp?" asked Monte Joe.

"I suppose we can only take them to Trail

Crossing and send them from there on to jail somewhere in one of the towns."

"That will be best, captain, as Miss Hassan would feel badly to have them strung up by the cowboys."

"Yes, but it is just such fellows that the practice of a little cowboy justice upon, would serve to help law and order in Texas," said Buck Taylor.

"Well, there is no hurry about this matter, so remain over to-morrow for a rest, and the next day we will start for Trail Crossing and carry the prisoners with us," the captain said, and then the three parted for the night, intending the next morning after breakfast to ride over and see the three scamps, as Buck Taylor had said:

"I want a talk with them, Captain Hassan, for maybe I can learn something from one of them, under offers of bribes and threats, as all these wear the brand."

"You saw the brand then, Buck?"

"Yes, sir, in the left palm of each."

"Then that should indicate that they all were allied to Tiger Tom?"

"Without a doubt, sir, and it would be a good thing if one could be forced, or bribed to tell just what that brand means."

The next morning, after breakfast, as they were preparing to mount their horses for the ride to the cowboy camp, Rio Grande Rob rode up at a gallop.

He raised his sombrero politely to Mrs. Hassan and Belle, bowed to Buck Taylor and Monte Joe, and it was very evident that he came on some errand of importance.

"Well, Rob, what is it?" asked the captain, divining that he had something to tell.

"I came to report about the prisoners, sir."

"Well, what about them?"

"They escaped last night."

"They escaped, Rob?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where did you have them confined?"

"In the jug, sir."

"And they got out of there?"

"Yes, sir."

"Had you a guard over them?"

"Yes, sir, and they tried to bribe him."

"But they did not, of course, for I do not believe one of your men would take a bribe."

"No, sir, but he tried to lead them on, by pretending to bite at their bait, and asked them to give him the three thousand they promised."

"They told him to come in and get it."

"Well?"

"He raised the door and as he started in, he was struck on the head with a bench and the three prisoners walked out."

"And escaped?"

"Yes, sir, they got away."

"Well, Rob, I do not see how you can be held responsible for their getting away; but who was the guard?"

"Cowboy Ben."

"Then they certainly could not have bribed him."

"But is he much hurt?"

"No, sir, he was only temporarily stunned."

"And you could not follow their trail?"

"Not the way they went, sir; but they were three mighty bad men, for believing Ben was going to aid them, they told him all they had done, and plotted more mischief."

"Well, Rob, I am sorry they are gone; but I will be over to see you soon, with Captain Taylor and Monte Joe."

"We will be glad to see you, sir, and Rio Grande Rob wheeled and rode away, after again doffing his hat."

"Well, I am sorry about the escape of those villains, and you must not venture off alone again, Belle."

"No, no, my child, for I shall be most anxious," her mother said.

"I will not disobey your wish, mamma," was Belle's response, and then the horses were ordered and Captain Hassan and his two guests rode away from the cabin, taking the trail that led to the cowboys' camp.

"It was sad about the escape of those three men, Buck," said Monte Joe with a light laugh.

"Yes, and the trail they took none of the cowboys are anxious to follow," was Buck Taylor's reply.

"What do you mean, Buck, for you and Monte Joe seem to have a secret that I do not know?"

"Captain Hassan, Cowboy Ben got the secret out of those fellows of what they were guilty of, by pretending to befriend them, and then they sought to kill him, and—well, the cowboys hanged them, that is all."

"You don't mean it, Buck Taylor?"

"That is my idea, sir."

"And mine," said Monte Joe.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE TRAIL TO SHADOW LAND.

THE party from Soldier's Retreat Ranch rode up to the camp of the cowboys to find it almost deserted.

Rio Grande Rob was there, and a few of his men, but they looked as serene as a May morn.

"Well, Rob, nothing more from the escaped prisoners, I suppose?" asked the captain.

"Not a word, sir."
 "Have you been out on the trail?"
 "No, sir."
 "Why not?"
 "Well, sir, I felt that it would be useless."
 "Don't you think that it was rather strange they escaped as they did?"
 "Not under the circumstances, sir, for they had it all their own way, after the door was raised, to get out."
 "Did you have any talk with them?"
 "Some little, sir."
 "Well, Rob, I wish to tell you that there is a rumor that Tiger Tom is not dead."
 "Not dead, sir?"
 "No; or rather, it is said so."
 "I was not at the lasso duel, sir, but the boys who were there say that Captain Taylor killed him."
 "So it was believed; but he has been seen, he or his ghost, or his counterpart, since, both in Trail Crossing and upon the prairie."
 "Captain Hassan, that accounts for a scare one of my men got not long ago."
 "He was herding cattle, and some of the ponies strayed, so he went after them and did not get back until late in the night."
 "The next morning he told me he had seen Tiger Tom's ghost, that the ponies had been going toward a ford in the creek, but suddenly turned back, and he saw in the moonlight a horseman, whom he vowed was Tiger Tom's spirit."
 "The men laughed at him about it, so he did not refer to it again."
 "Where is he?"
 The cowboy captain turned to one of his men saddling a horse a short distance away, and said:
 "Brick, ask Bony Bedford to come here, please."
 In a few minutes a tall, bony-looking cowboy approached at a long, swinging walk, as though he rode so much he did not have good use of his legs.
 "Well, Bedford, I hear that you saw Tiger Tom's ghost?" said Captain Hassan, pleasantly.
 The man's face flushed, and he glanced at Rob, while he answered:
 "The boys laughs at me, captain, because I said I saw Tiger Tom's ghost; but I saw it, all the same."
 "You believe in ghosts, then?"
 "I didn't until t'other night, sir, but what I seen then made me change my opinion."
 "What did you see, Bedford?"
 "Well, captain, I was following some running mustangs that were making for a ford on the river, fifteen miles from here."
 "The trail goes down a gulch to the water, and is narrow, and the mustangs dropped into single file to cross, for I was unable to head them off."
 "But suddenly the leaders wheeled about and all ran away from the ford back on the home trail."
 "I wondered what had headed them, and suspected it might be Comanches; but just then up out of the gulch rode a horseman."
 "It was bright moonlight, and so I saw him distinctly, and it was Tiger Tom on earth again as sure as my name is Bony Bedford."
 "How far were you from him?"
 "A hundred feet, sir, and I stopped my horse and took a close, long look."
 "He did not speak, or move, only gazed straight at me, and then I let my horse turn and go for all he was worth, and he was willing too."
 "I did not tell the boys until the next morning, and then they said I had had too much tanglefoot, and laughed at me; but I saw what I tell you all the same."
 "Well, Bedford, it is rumored that Tiger Tom was not killed, as we all supposed, so you must be on the watch for him."
 "And you, Rob, must keep your pickets out again, as you did some months ago."
 "Let the men camp in squads of three and five, around the ranch, from six to ten miles away, and keep a bright watch for any foe, while the cattle must be kept nearer the house and not allowed so wide a range."
 "There have been raids upon several of the ranches nearer the river, and we do not wish to be surprised by any of the Mexican bands of outlaws, or by the Indians either."
 "No, sir, we do not, and I'll place the men to-day," said Rio Grande Rob.
 "We are going, Captain Taylor, Monte Joe and myself, to Trail Crossing to glean what news we can about Tiger Tom's reappearance, and tell the men not to run from him if they see him next time."
 "I will, sir; but, Captain Hassan?"
 "Yes, Rob."
 "Won't you please have the Girl Captain keep at home, sir, for she may get into trouble by roaming so far away."
 "My daughter will not go so far away again, Rob; but, tell me, do you not think that those three men took a trail last night that sooner or later we all must take?"
 "Which trail is that, sir?"
 "To Shadow Land."
 "I reckon you know it all, sir, so there is no use hiding it, only don't let the ladies know, for

we did hang them, after knowing just what they had done.

"Yes, sir, that is the trail they took, to Shadow Land."

There was no need of asking more, and as they returned to the ranch, Captain Hassan said:

"Buck, you and Monte Joe surmised right."

CHAPTER XXIII.

AT TRAIL CROSSING.

THE day after the interview with Rio Grande Rob, the Saddle King, accompanied by Monte Joe and Captain Hassan made an early start for Trail Crossing.

Buck Taylor led the way by a trail through some timber, which he said would cut off several miles from their journey, and as they wound through the woods, they suddenly came upon three freshly-made graves.

Buck halted and pointed in silence to them.

"Yes, they are the three prisoners," said Captain Hassan, while Monte Joe remarked:

"This is where they struck the trail for the Shadow Land."

"Rio Grande Rob and his boys did their work well," and Buck Taylor, as he spoke, pointed to a long limb jutting out from a large tree, directly over the graves.

Along the limb were three ropes, the ends hanging down several feet, and some six feet apart.

"If any one wanted to find the other ends of these ropes, they would have to look in those three graves, about the necks of those fellows," Monte Joe remarked.

And then the three horsemen rode silently on their way, meditating upon cowboy justice.

It was after midnight before Trail Crossing was reached, as they did not care to enter the settlement by day.

They rode at once to the stable in the rear of the inn, and having put up their horses, went on into the place which Monte Joe made his home, and where they were at least sure of getting a good supper and fairly comfortable bed.

The tavern was not a large one, but the landlord was one of those accomplished individuals who "knew how to run a hotel," and demonstrated the fact to the pleasure of all who put up there.

A shanty it might be called, from its rude structure, but then there were a few "choice rooms for special guests," and Monte Joe could get all he wanted in the establishment, so soon had his friends comfortably located near his own pleasant quarters.

When they sat down to supper the landlord looked after them himself, all others having finished the evening meal, and Monte Joe asked:

"Say, Landlord Braddock, have you heard any more about Tiger Tom's being seen in Trail Crossing?"

"Yes, Monte Joe, he has been here again," quickly said the landlord, while he continued:

"I intended to speak to you about it when I saw you alone."

"These are my friends, Brad, so out with what you have to say."

"Well, he was here last night."

"Stayed here all night?"

"Yes."

"Go on."

"He came in after dark and I was at the desk."

"He had left his horse in the stable, and I did not see him until he was at my side."

"I spoke to him and he bowed, then I held out a pen for him to register."

"He took it and wrote his name."

"What did he write, Brad?"

"He wrote simply:

"The Tiger of Texas."

"Then he asked for room thirteen, and went in to supper; but, though he ordered a good meal, he did not touch a mouthful."

"Next he went to the gambling saloon and took a big drink, after which he sat down at a table to play, but no one went near him, and he took a pack of cards from his pocket, played a game of *solitaire*, and then, without a word, after taking another drink, left the saloon."

"He went straight to his room, but though he remained all night he did not go to bed, or if he did he made it up again, but it looked as though it had not been occupied."

"He came down at dawn, tossed the clerk a bill, and without waiting for his change went to the stable, ordered his horse and rode away."

"Now, what do you think of him, Monte Joe?"

All had listened with the deepest attention to the story of the landlord, and at his question the gambler said:

"I am sorry I was not here to play a game with him."

"It was reported and believed here in Trail City that he was killed."

"Yes, I killed him, or supposed that I did."

"He will have to be run to death again."

"But, do you know, Landlord Braddock, which trail he took out of town?" said Buck Taylor.

"The one toward the river."

"You knew Tiger Tom well, sir?" said Captain Hassan.

"Yes, sir, he always stopped here when he came to Trail Crossing upon his sprees."

"You saw this man last night?"

"Oh, yes."

"You spoke with him?"

"I did."

"Was his voice the same as Tiger Tom's?"

"It was the same."

"Would you swear before a court that this man last night was Tiger Tom?"

"I would do so, certainly, for he was no other."

"Will you let us see his name, as he registered it?"

"Oh, yes."

"Have you his name upon the register, written some time ago, to compare it with?"

"Yes, the last time he was here, before last night, and on several occasions before."

"I should like to see the names," said Captain Hassan.

Having finished supper, they adjourned to the landlord's room and he brought the register in there.

All examined the autographs of Tiger Tom of back dates with the one written the night before, and even Captain Hassan said:

"The writing is the same!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

FOR BIG STAKES.

THE Lone Star Hotel of Landlord Braddock was the most pretentious building in the settlement, or "town" known as Trail Crossing.

It was of two stories, built of logs and boards, innocent of paint, and the rest of the buildings were in very much the same condition.

There were half a dozen stores in Trail Crossing, as many blacksmith shops, a school-house and church as a combination building, and a score of saloons and gambling-houses combined.

Around Trail Crossing was a cattle country, and it was about on the border line of civilization, so that that the community could boast, if such a boast was a credit, of as hard an element of humanity as could be found anywhere.

There were a few good citizens in Trail Crossing, but, like angels' visits, they were few and far between.

The gambling saloon most popular in the place was near the hotel, in the same timber in fact that sheltered the Lone Star Tavern and its adjacent stables, and it was to this place of chance and ardent spirits that Monte Joe, Buck Taylor and Captain Hassan wended their way after having seen Tiger Tom's autographs on the hotel register.

Monte Joe was welcomed with a shout as he entered, which showed his popularity, and Buck Taylor was also known by some of the crowd, as the "Lariat Demon" and "Saddle King," but especially as the man who had mastered Tiger Tom one night in that saloon.

The rumors of Tiger Tom's death in a lasso duel with Buck Taylor had been discussed when heard, and there had appeared the alleged dead man to contradict the statement that he had departed this life.

Tiger Tom seemed much changed from the man who had been in their midst some months before, for then he was wild as a Texas steer and boisterous, drinking to madness and gambling as recklessly.

Now he returned the same in appearance, but as subdued as a deacon.

What it meant the people of Trail Crossing could not understand.

And right upon his heels, almost, came Buck Taylor.

This certainly looked like trouble between the two men when they should meet.

Those present who saw the Saddle King there, at once made up their minds that Buck Taylor was on the trail of the Tiger of Texas again.

Monte Joe sat down at a table with his friends and enjoyed a little game for a couple of hours, with a limit of a dollar, making it merely to pass away time, and to the surprise of others present interested in their playing the Saddle King was the winner.

Emboldened by the want of success in the gambler, a cattleman challenged him to play for five hundred dollars, best two in three games.

Monte Joe accepted in his pleasant way, and the cattleman won the first game, and, becoming elated, said:

"Make it five hundred more, Monte Joe."

"As you please, Sawyer," was the mild response.

The gambler won the second game, and the third was played amid a deathlike silence.

Nick Sawyer always had plenty of money, yet he hated to lose a dollar.

He was a desperate man to arouse, and he always picked a quarrel with a man who won his money, which, however, was a rare occurrence, as he was almost universally the winner.

Many men would not play with him, fearing trouble, but there were strangers going and coming all the time to and from Trail Crossing, so he found plenty of adversaries for a game.

All were astonished when Monte Joe played

with him, and they saw Sawyer's face darken when he lost the second game.

But he was a plucky player, and so said ere the cards were thrown down on the third game: "I'll make it two thousand, if you dare Monte Joe."

There was a slur in the words and tone, and all glanced at Monte Joe; but he sat perfectly serene, and with no show of anger said:

"I'll tell you what I dare do, Nick Sawyer."

"What?" was the rude query.

"I have got considerable money about me, my watch, chain, ring, pin and cuff-buttons, not to speak of my weapons and some important documents which you might wish to see."

"What do I want to see them for?"

"Well, we will not discuss that, but I'll play you for all I have with me against all you have on your person, win or lose, on the next game."

"Why, man, I've got over four thousand in good money right in my pocket here," and he patted his breast pocket.

"Well, I have a trifle over that sum with me."

"Show it up!"

Still Monte Joe kept his temper, and placed upon the table a roll of bills.

"Count it, Saddle King."

"Let me do it."

"No, Sawyer, I won't take your count any more than you will my word."

"Saddle King will count it, so you can see that I have less to win in your pile than you have in mine."

"Four thousand seven hundred," said Buck Taylor.

"Well, I've got no backdown in me, so it's a go."

"Very well, now play," and Monte Joe was in one of his quietest moods, a calm which many felt betokened a storm.

CHAPTER XXV.

A WINNING HAND.

NICK SAWYER grew a trifle uneasy as soon as he took up his cards.

Monte Joe became even more serene, and both Buck Taylor and Captain Hassan felt anxious for the result.

If Monte Joe lost, then he would sacrifice his beautiful gems, a ring and a pin, a handsome watch and massive gold chain that encircled his neck, a pair of revolvers which were gold-mounted and a bowie the hilt of which even was most valuable for its rare workmanship.

Besides these, he would lose nearly five thousand dollars in cash, a very large sum of money for even him to forfeit who was supposed to be rich and who usually was a winner.

As to Nick Sawyer, no one knew just how he got his money.

He traded in cattle, and dressed as a cowboy swell; but his trades brought him in no such sums as he often took pride in exhibiting.

He had proven himself a dangerous man, and had over in the burying-ground several graves to his credit, or rather discredit.

Often had he tried to get into a game of cards with Monte Joe, but with no success, and it was a cause of surprise to many that the gambler had at last consented to play, for he seldom would indulge in a game with one who was quarrelsome, or insulting if he lost.

The interest in the saloon had centered in Monte Joe and his party when they entered, and now they were the more objects of attention, for many small games were broken up to see the gambler and Nick Sawyer matched together.

"Well, show your hand and beat that," said Sawyer savagely as he laid his hand upon the table.

"I can beat you, Sawyer, for I hold four aces," and Monte Joe revealed his hand.

Sawyer's face turned white, and he looked like a man who meant to test his strength to the utmost, while he hissed forth:

"See here, Monte Joe, when you played with your friends for small sums you lost steadily."

"Now you have won from me."

"My luck has changed," was the quiet rejoinder.

"It could only change in one way."

"How is that?"

"By cheating!"

As he spoke he quickly covered Monte Joe with his revolver.

But Monte Joe neither changed color or attempted to draw a weapon.

He merely said:

"That is not the question, Sawyer."

"What is?"

"That I won your money and all you have about you, and you have not paid your debt."

"You cheated me."

"When you have paid your just debt I will answer that charge."

"No, I have you covered, and I will kill you if you attempt to draw a weapon."

"But you will pay me," and still Monte Joe's manner was unruffled.

"No. I will not pay you."

"Then I shall demand it from your partner behind you."

"What partner?"

"Will you pay me my winnings?"

"No."

"Then I shall make your partner do so."

"What partner?" and Nick Sawyer was growing visibly uneasy, yet dared not look behind him and thus leave Monte Joe uncovered for an instant.

"The partner that can force you to pay me."

"Who the devil do you mean?" savagely asked Sawyer.

The answer came with strange distinctness:

"Pearley Moore!"

A wild cry broke from the lips of Nick Sawyer and he staggered to his feet while he shouted:

"No! no! he is not here, for he is dead!"

"But I am here, and very much alive, Nick Sawyer," and Monte Joe now had his weapon in his hand.

But the man had betrayed himself he knew, betrayed some secret of his life, and he wheeled quickly, nerved to desperation when he saw not the man whose name Monte Joe had mentioned, and at once his finger touched trigger.

The bullet cut through Monte Joe's hat.

His went surer, for it entered the forehead of Nick Sawyer.

The crowd swayed to and fro in terrible excitement, and the gambler was the coolest one of all, for he bent over the fallen man and began to quickly take from him the roll of money, and some papers he had hidden away in an inner pocket of his shirt.

His watch and belt of arms he also took, and then said to the keeper of the saloon:

"Bury him at my expense, Torry."

"He was quick enough but not sure enough in his aim."

"Shall we go, captain?" and Monte Joe turned to Captain Hassan and Buck, who had been silent but deeply interested spectators of the tragic scene, the Saddle King watching Nick Sawyer like a hawk, intending to prevent his killing the gambler if he made the attempt; but when he saw that Monte Joe had gotten his revolver in his hand, then he felt that there was no need for his aid.

As the three went to Monte Joe's rooms in the hotel, Captain Hassan said:

"How was it that you so unnerved that man, Monte Joe?"

"By speaking the name of a man he murdered!"

"Abl! you showed wonderful nerve yourself, under the circumstances."

"A man of my calling must never lose his nerve."

"You gave the man a fright that was terrible to see."

"Yes, but he recovered more quickly than I anticipated, the moment he did not see a ghost behind him."

"He forced me to kill him, when I meant to make him a prisoner only."

"Now, what would you want with a prisoner, Monte Joe?" asked Buck Taylor.

"This money is counterfeit! was Monte Joe's quiet answer, throwing the roll of bills he had won upon the table before Buck Taylor and Captain Hassan.

CHAPTER XXVI.

ON THE TRAIL TO MISSION RANCH.

MONTE JOE offered no further explanation of his affair with Nick Sawyer, or about the money he had said was counterfeit.

He put it away, with some papers he had taken from the body, his weapons and other things, and then turned to his friends, as though to drop the subject wholly, and asked:

"Well, what is the decision regarding Tiger Tom, gentlemen?"

"I still assert that the man is dead," firmly answered Captain Hassan.

"Would you swear that Nick Sawyer was dead?"

"Yes."

"Upon what grounds?"

"I saw the wound you gave him, but had I not done so, I felt his pulse."

"And you, Buck?"

"I have the greatest faith in Captain Hassan's opinion."

"As I have, understand me; but do you believe Tiger Tom is dead?"

"I would upon my own judgment say no, but then as Captain Hassan is so firm in his opinion that he is dead, I am staggered completely, I admit."

"Who is this man, then, who was here?"

"I give it up."

"As I do, Monte Joe, for I cannot understand it; but when you ask me if the man Buck fought the duel with is dead, I say yes."

"Well, we have learned something by coming here, for Tiger Tom, himself, counterpart or ghost, is but twenty-four hours ahead of us, and I have accomplished something in the death of Nick Sawyer which I cannot now explain."

"Now, what are we to do?"

"What do you say, Buck?" and Captain Hassan turned to the Saddle King, who responded:

"Oh, I am out on a trail, and I shall follow it."

"Tiger Tom's?"

"Yes, Monte Joe."

"Do you think we can strike it?"

"I guess so; but if not, I think I know where it will lead."

"Where?"

"To his home."

"I am with you, Buck."

"As I am," said Captain Hassan.

"Now I do not wish to have you, Captain Hassan, and Monte Joe, to go with me, unless you feel fully inclined to do so and can spare the time; but I wish to solve this mystery as to Tiger Tom's being alive or dead, and I go out upon his trail in the morning."

"If we find it goes to his ranch, it will pass near enough to my home for us to go there for the night, and relieve the anxiety of my wife and daughter, if they have any, regarding our coming here, while it would be as well to have go with us half a dozen of my men, Buck."

"Yes, sir; but if I strike Tiger Tom's trail, I shall stick to it, while you and Monte Joe can go by the ranch and come on with the men."

"You will not go to the Mission Ranch alone, not until we overtake you?"

"I will not try to capture Tiger Tom, sir, without your aid, for I promised Derringer Dave as much."

"But I will reconnoiter as closely as I dare, to learn all the information I can of what is going on there."

"Well, we will start then in the morning," said Monte Joe, and he went down to the office to tell Landlord Braddock to have their horses ready for them before dawn.

It was still dark when they rode away from Trail Crossing, for they did not care to be seen following upon the trail taken by Tiger Tom.

They soon got out of the scattered settlement, rather than town, and when they reached the spot where the trails branched off, one less traveled than the others, the Saddle King began to show his skill in prairie-craft by hunting up the tracks of the horse ridden by Tiger Tom, or the man said to be the Desperado Ranchero, as he was frequently called.

His companions were experienced trailers, but they watched the Saddle King with deep interest, and followed him slowly as he moved up the trail.

At last Buck Taylor said:

"This is the way he went."

"There is his trail."

"How are you so sure, Buck?" asked Captain Hassan.

"The horse of Tiger Tom was said to be a very large animal, and here is a hoof-track larger than the others."

"Now a large hoof might be found upon a small horse, but you notice that this track sinks much deeper than any other, showing far greater weight in the animal that left the trail than in the others that went this way."

"You reason well, Buck, and I guess it is the trail of the man we seek."

"Tiger Tom, captain?" asked Monte Joe with a smile.

"No, for I have not yielded that point yet, you know."

"When will you?"

"When I find his grave empty."

"Abl! that you will know in a couple of days."

"But you will be convinced then?"

"Not altogether, though it will go far toward convincing me that I might have been mistaken in saying he was dead, though if he recovered it was a miraculous recovery."

"Suppose you saw him?"

"Then I would be convinced, I think, after one test."

"And that test?"

"The Tiger Tom whom Buck Taylor killed, or we will say killed, had a brand upon his wrist."

"A brand?"

"Well I should rather say that there had been pricked into his wrist with india ink the letters 'T. T.' and the words:

'FIFTH CAV. U. S. A.'

"I shall wish to see the same brand on him."

"He had another, captain, also," Buck Taylor said.

"Yes."

"In his left palm was also pricked in with india ink a five-point star, with the letters in the points:

T. I. G. E. R.

OR

T. E. X. A. S.

"Then in the center of the star was a red tiger."

"Abl! and that is the secret brand you looked for in the hands of the three outlaw prisoners Miss Belle and myself brought to the ranch two days ago?" said Monte Joe.

"Yes, and they wore the brand."

"Which means?"

"I am not sure but I believe, and so does Captain Hassan, that the men so branded belong to a secret band, of which Tiger Tom was chief."

"That, however, we could only prove in part, and believed that his death would end the affair."

"But if we find men leagued together now,

wearing that brand, we cannot go amiss in securing them as outlaws; but here is where we branch off, and see, there goes the single trail of the large horse, so he too went this way."

CHAPTER XXVII.

ALONE ON THE TRAIL.

FOR an hour the three horsemen followed the lone trail, which all felt sure now was made by the large horse of the man who was said to be Tiger Tom.

Then a halt was made for breakfast, and thus another hour passed, when mounting their horses they moved on once more.

With over thirty hours' start of them they had no thought of coming up with the Desperado Ranchero, yet still Buck Taylor hoped to reach the Mission Ranch not many hours behind him.

It was true that the trail might branch off in a number of places and not go to the Mission Ranch, but Buck held high hopes that the man would go there, and he had every reason to suppose that he would.

After dinner they came to the trail branching off toward Soldier's Retreat, and here Buck Taylor halted and said:

"Now there lies your trail, Captain Hassan, and Monte Joe will accompany you home."

"And you, Buck?"

"Shall stick to the Tiger's track," announced the Lasso King with a smile.

"You will follow the trail you are now on?"

"Yes, sir."

"And we will go by my ranch, get a few of my cowboys and come on after you?"

"Yes, sir, for I will mark my trail well, so that you can readily follow after you find it."

"We will hit it further down toward the Mission Ranch, and you remember, you are to make no attempt at a capture of the man until we get there."

"I will wait for your coming, sir."

"Well, look for us to join you to-morrow night, or the next day at furthest."

With this Captain Hassan and Monte Joe rode on toward Soldier's Retreat Ranch, distant something over thirty miles, while Buck Taylor held on toward the fort-like home of Tiger Tom, fifty miles away, and toward the Rio Grande.

But one horse had gone along the trail recently and that one he was following, for he believed that it carried Tiger Tom.

His own mind was full of conflicting emotions, regarding the life or death of Tiger Tom.

He felt that he had killed the man, that he had ended his days in the duel he had been challenged to fight with him with lassoes.

And yet it might be, though very seriously hurt, the man had recovered.

The actions of the Tiger of Texas had seemed strange, like a man demented some had said, while his face was pale and he looked as though he had been seriously ill.

"When next we meet there must be no doubt about it, for it shall be his life or mine," grimly said the Lasso King.

So on the trail alone he went watching it closely and keeping his eyes well ahead, for he was not sure that he would not ride into an ambush.

Having gone half a dozen miles he began to mark his trail, expecting that Captain Hassan and his companions would strike it along there somewhere, upon their return from the ranch.

He left ample trace that he had been along, so that the trailers could follow rapidly as they pleased.

Until nightfall he held on, and then camped for the night in a lonely gulch not far from the trail.

When dawn came he was again in the saddle, and as he turned into the trail he saw that another horseman had gone along during the night.

The tracks showed that the horseman had passed only a short while before dawn, and as he had been riding by night he could hardly be following Tiger Tom and his trail, but taking the direct route to the ranch at the old Mission, or in that direction at least.

The discovery of this second trail caused Buck Taylor to be more cautious, for now he knew that he had another foe to deal with, for who else could this other horseman be, riding toward Tiger Tom's ranch, than one of his men, or allies?

Noting the direction in which the trail ran, and that there were many good places for an ambush, Buck Taylor branched off from it, taking a parallel course some quarter of a mile away, and going to it every few miles to see that it was going as he supposed.

This caused him delay, yet it saved his life, for when approaching the trail to see if it still held on, he discovered a horse hitched in a thicket that grew upon one side of a ridge over which the trail wound.

The rider of that horse was evidently lying in wait for some one, and must be near, doubtless among the rocks at the top of the ridge.

So Buck Taylor quickly drew back out of sight, staked his horse in a little bit of meadowland and began to make his way toward the spot where the rider of the animal he had discovered must be.

The nature of the ground was such that it was slow work, but the Lasso King had the patience of an Indian and the persistency.

At last he reached the thicket and approached the horse cautiously.

The animal was a good one, hitched by short rein to a swinging limb, and his bridle and saddle were of Mexican manufacture, while the *serape* rolled closely behind the saddle showed also that the rider must be one from the land beyond the Rio Grande.

Then the Lasso King set out to find the man who owned the horse.

He moved with the greatest caution, not knowing but that he might be himself watched, and after some time reached a rock near the trail.

He saw the tracks of Tiger Tom's horse going by, and those of the animal belonging to the rider he was looking for, and they wound on down the ridge.

Peering over the rocks he beheld the rider.

He was lying upon a *serape*, his rifle by his side, and his eyes peering through a bush he had broken off and placed there, over the ridge along the trail which Buck Taylor would have been following but for his suspecting an ambush and riding off some distance, but parallel to it.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE THREAT.

BUCK TAYLOR smiled blandly, for his game was as good as bagged.

The man was not a Mexican, though he rode the outfit of one.

He was a bearded fellow, with long, unkempt hair, and a rough dress, wearing the leather leggings of a cowboy.

He had a belt of arms strapped on, and his rifle was right at his side.

He was lying in ambush for some one, but whether the Lasso King was the object of his attentions Buck Taylor could only guess.

The man had not the remotest idea that he had been so cleverly flanked, and was apparently as safe as he would be in his own house, if he had one.

Having discovered the situation exactly, and taken in the surroundings, Buck Taylor decided to move upon the enemy; so he disappeared behind the rocks and soon after appeared on the trail stealing noiselessly toward the man, in his recumbent attitude.

He put his feet down without the slightest sound, and each step brought him nearer to the one who so little dreamed of another's presence.

When but half a dozen feet separated the two, Buck stood upright, his revolver leveled at the prostrate form, and in his calmest tones saluted:

"Good-morning, pard!"

With a yell of terror the man in ambush turned to find Taylor's revolver covering him.

The shock to the man's senses was so great, that he did not try to draw a weapon, to grasp his rifle or resist.

He simply dropped back upon his *serape* and called out:

"Don't shoot, pard, don't shoot!"

"Well, I don't intend to unless you force me to do so."

"But I wish to draw your teeth so that you won't be dangerous."

With this Buck Taylor took the man's rifle, then unbuckled his belt of arms and felt over him for a concealed weapon.

"I hain't got no more, Pard Saddle King!"

"You know me, then?"

"I has seen you at Trail Crossing."

"Yes, and elsewhere."

"No, pard."

"I say you have, for you were one of the gang that went to aid Tiger Tom when I moved on him with my cowboys."

"No, pard, yer is mistaken, for I hated Tiger Tom as I does p'izen."

"Well, I know that you were with him, for I never mistake a villain's face once I have seen it."

"Hold up your hands!"

"Ole pard! I—"

"Obey me!"

"They is up!"

"Throw the palms toward me and open your hands, for I do not wish to see a derringer in them."

"There they is, Pard Saddle King."

Buck Taylor gave a hasty glance at the palm of the left hand and muttered:

"Yes, I was sure I was right, for there is the Star and Tiger brand Tiger Tom's allies wear."

"Did yer speak ter me, pard?"

"I say I am sure that you are Tiger Tom's ally."

"I jist swears I hain't, Saddle King."

"Well, I'll put these on you for safe-keeping," and quickly were a pair of steel cuffs slipped upon the wrists.

"Lor, pard, this hain't square, for what has I done to you?"

"Nothing; but you were waiting to kill me."

"No indeed!"

"Why were you lying here?"

"Resting."

"Just at the top of ridge, and with this bush to peer through."

"I didn't want ter be rid upon suddenly."

"So you only kept watch in one direction, eh?"

The man was silent and Buck Taylor said:

"Now you had orders to follow the trail of Tiger Tom, if it was Tiger Tom's, and lie in ambush for any one who might take his trail."

"You were gambling in the hotel saloon the night I was there with some friends, for I remember having seen you, and when we left you followed us."

"When we parted you knew it, for you were watching us, and then you came on alone after me, expecting to ride by me in camp at night, and then ambush me by day."

"That was your game, and I played against you and won."

"You would have killed me, while I shall only hold you for future reference."

"Come, I want you to go with me."

The man seemed dazed that the Lasso King had read him so thoroughly, and dejectedly asked:

"Whar yer goin' ter take me, Saddle King?"

"Well, for the present, we will follow this trail; but, if you do not do as I order you when the time comes, I am pretty sure you will end in the grave."

"Oh, Lord!" groaned the prisoner, and he looked very badly scared.

Buck Taylor then took up his *serape* and arms, and bidding him come, walked toward his horse.

"Stepping up to a rock around which the trail ran, he took a piece of chalk from his pocket and wrote upon it:

"I broke up an ambush here—have got him."

"Thar is others coming?" said the man quickly.

"Oh, yes, cowboys."

"Then I'm hanged."

"Well, they will have their lassoes with them, I admit; but whether your neck is stretched or not, rests with you."

"How is that, Saddle King?"

"Well, when we get to a camp I am making for, I shall ask you some questions."

"If you answer to my satisfaction, you shall have a chance to leave Texas in the best of health; but if you do not, then my idea is that you will die of the lariat throat trouble, which has been an epidemic of late among men of your stripe."

"Now, mount your horse and we will go after mine over yonder in the thicket, after which we will follow the trail of Tiger Tom."

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE BRANDED HAND.

THE man whom Buck Taylor had so cleverly captured eyed his captor curiously, for there was mingled fear and admiration in the glance.

He had known the Lasso King by sight for a long time, and he had always held an unbounded admiration for a man who was the hero the cowboy chief had proven himself upon many an occasion.

Still, the conceit of the man, which was great, his confidence in his own prowess, aim and strength, not to speak of his nerve, had given him an idea that should he be ever called upon to face Buck Taylor as a foe, he would get the better of him.

Now he realized how easily he had been taken, and the shock of that cool voice behind him, the sight of that tall form within six feet of him and a cocked revolver covering him, had so completely unnerved him that he could not even draw a weapon.

Here he was then, his wrists manacled, bound to his horse, riding along by the side of the man whom he had always felt that he could master.

Buck Taylor became taciturn once they were upon their way, though his prisoner was talkative and seemed anxious to enter into conversation.

They held on until noon, when they camped for dinner, and the horses were staked out to feed.

Buck broiled some venison steaks, for he had shot a deer that morning on the trail, made a pot of coffee, roasted some potatoes, and with a loaf of bread the two had a good dinner, the prisoner eating heartily.

Then they resumed their way until the shadows began to lengthen, and the prisoner volunteered:

"Better not venture too far on this trail, Lasso King."

"Why?"

"It leads within a mile of the Haunted Ranch."

"What of that?"

"Well, it's said that there are Mexican raiders in the locality."

"You know the ranch then?"

"I has been by it."

"Do you know the ridge behind the ranch?"

"I has seen it."

"Well, I shall camp there to-night, for I know that there is a good spring up a canyon in the range, and the grass is the very best."

"It's the very place for a camp."

"Waal, you knows best, but I allers feels skittish so near the Haunted Ranch."

"What are you afraid of?"

"Waal, thar be ghosts they say prowlin' round, and the Mexican raiders are a mighty wicked lot."

"Yes, but I do not fear ghosts, and if I cannot stand off the raiders, I can outrun them, for that is a fine horse you ride— Where did you steal him?"

"Steal him?" reproachfully asked the man.

"Yes; for you men never buy a horse you can steal."

"But come, we turn off in this valley brook for the camping place I spoke of."

The cowboy chief turned his horse up the bed of the stream, and followed it for a quarter of a mile, when he branched off into a canyon, the entrance to which was so overgrown with trees as not to be visible a hundred feet away.

He followed in the flow of a rivulet coming from a spring up the canyon, but the waters of which soon effaced the tracks of the horses.

Pressing through the foliage, Buck Taylor, leading the horse of his prisoner, held on up the narrow canyon around a bend, where it ended abruptly in another hundred of yards.

But there was the spring, a most generous one, and quantities of grass for the horse, with plenty of dry wood for fires.

The sides of the canyon were high and precipitous, while they were covered with dense foliage that no eye could peer through.

It was an ideal secret camp, and could be well defended.

Buck Taylor dismounted, and his first work was to unsaddle and stake out the horses.

Then he collected some wood to build a fire, when it should become dark, for the smoke would be seen in the daytime, and this he did not wish.

With his own rubber blankets he made a tent, and spread the blankets of the prisoner near him.

His next move was to get all ready for cooking supper as soon as it was dark, for he had something on hand for the night, though he did not wish the prisoner to know this.

"Now, pard, what is your name, for I wish a little talk with you, as we are comfortable here and have half an hour more of daylight?" and Buck sat down on his blanket near the prisoner.

"My name is Tony Pickett."

"Well, Mr. Pickett, what is your business?"

"I'm a guide for wagon trains, and folks as wants ter buffalo hunt."

"Have you been long in Texas?"

"Say, Lasso King, you is wuss nor a Sunday-school teacher fer wantin' ter know; but I'll tell yer I were born in Vermont, came to Texas as a boy, and ther Injuns raidin' my ranch broke me up, so I took ter guidin' fer a livin'."

"Well, having given your own story, answer my questions if you set any value on your life, for what I ask you I demand correct answers to, and if I trip you, catch you lying, it will only be the worse for you."

"I need your aid, and if you give it to me willingly, then I will give you a new start in the world and let you go."

"If you deceive me, I'll simply hand you over to my boys to hang."

"Now I think we are acquainted with each other, Mr. Tony Pickett."

"Waal, we is more intimate than I is agreeable to."

"Now when did you first meet Tiger Tom?"

"I doesn't know him ter speak of, though I has often seen him at Trail Crossing."

"You start in with a lie; but let me know whether you think he is dead, or not."

"I thought he was dead, but I saw him at Trail Crossing not long since, so changed my idea."

"And you are not one of his friends?"

"Not me."

"Well, Mr. Tony Pickett, how is it that you wear the brand of Tiger Tom's League in your left hand?"

The question was unexpected and asked in a sharp tone.

The man winced, turned pale and said in a hesitating way:

"When I was a cattleman some outlaws robbed me, and pricked that brand into my hand, and that is all I know about it."

"They said it would protect me from others of their hand."

Buck Taylor smiled, and then said earnestly:

"Well, Pard Pickett, that brand in your hand will cost you your life."

CHAPTER XXX.

REVEALED BY THE MOONLIGHT.

THE words of the Lasso King fell ominously upon the ears of the prisoner.

He turned his hand over and gazed into the palm upon the blue star with its red tiger in the center, and the lettering.

"When did yer see that hand, pard?" he asked in a curious way.

"When I made you turn the palms of your hands out at the time I captured you."

"It told me then that you were one of the secret band known as the Tigers of Texas."

"Lord no, pard, I doesn't belong to 'em."

"Well, you wear their brand and that speaks more truthfully than all your denials."

"But it is getting dark, so I will light the fire and we will have some supper."

There was soon a cheerful blaze in the canyon, the coffee-pot was soon simmering, and the odor of broiling bacon and venison filled the air.

The two men ate their supper with a relish, and then Buck Taylor said:

"I dislike to make a man uncomfortable, but I must put irons on your ankles for the night, pard, as you shall not get away."

The man groaned in agony of spirit at this, but could only yield, and when he had smoked his pipe Buck Taylor ironed him securely, told him to lie down upon his blankets and throwing his serape over him said:

"Now to water the horses."

The horses he did water, and again stake out, the fire was allowed to burn low, and then, on foot, Buck Taylor left the canyon.

He crossed the prairie from the ridge, going toward the dark hill rising like a giant sentinel before him.

There was a moon and his way was brightly lighted over the prairies.

"They used to have some vicious dogs, but I hope they have not got them now, for I do not care for a fight on my hands," he muttered.

He had once been the guest at Tiger Tom's home for the night, when the ranchero was away, so had taken in the surroundings pretty well, and once after he had visited the place secretly at night.

When his duel with Tiger Tom had occurred upon the prairie, near the base of the sugar-loaf hill, he had examined the place thoroughly with his glass, while awaiting the coming of his adversary.

Then too, Monte Joe, who had borne the form of his foe to the young and beautiful wife of Tiger Tom, had pointed out to him the place where he was to be buried.

It was toward this spot that Buck Taylor now made his way.

There was a clump of pines on the hillside, a pretty spot for a last resting-place of one beloved, and to reach it Buck Taylor had made a wide flank movement, so as not to alarm the dogs, for he had noted the direction of the wind, so as not to let them catch his scent, which, had he gone straight from the ridge down the wind, they could have done.

Reaching the steep hillside he climbed upward until he came to the edge of the clump of pines.

He was about to walk forward in search of Tiger Tom's grave, when his eyes fell upon a form coming in the moonlight beyond the pines.

Instantly he crouched down into shelter, and revolver in hand waited.

As the form drew nearer he saw that it was a woman.

"Tiger Tom's wife, and coming here," he muttered.

She came on slowly, and entering the pines came to a halt in an open space, where the moonlight brightly fell, and Buck Taylor now saw there a mound which he knew was a grave.

"If Tiger Tom is not dead and in that grave, why does his wife come here, and by night?" he mused as he beheld her drop upon her knees by the side of the mound.

Then there came to his ears the low sobbing of a woman, and he heard the words:

"My poor, poor Tom!"

"Lost, yes, forever lost."

The Lasso King felt his heart throb convulsively, and he placed his hand to his temples to still their beating.

Then he buried his head upon the rocks, as though not wishing to see the grief of the young wife of the Ranchero Desperado.

For a long while he remained thus, while the mournful sobbing of the woman at the grave came to his ears.

Could he have crept away he would have done so, yet he dared not move, for did she glance that way he would be seen, and discovery meant pursuit, and it was a long way to the ridge on foot.

So there he crouched, listening to the wailing of a woman, her woe over her dead, the man he had placed in the grave.

It was a terrible ordeal for the Lasso King, for a woman's tears always touched his brave heart, as they will the heart of any good man, and the more did they hurt him as he was the cause.

A long while it seemed to him that the widowed woman knelt there by the grave, the grave of a man whose name had been a terror, whose deeds had been criminal and red-handed, yet whom she loved.

At last she bent over, as though touching her lips to the cold earth, and then she arose and slowly glided away.

Buck Taylor watched her form until it was out of sight, and then he crept cautiously toward the grave.

A white object caught his eye, and he thrust it into his pocket, for it was the woman's handkerchief.

"Yes, Tiger Tom is dead," he said in a low tone, and then he turned slowly away and retraced his steps across the prairie to his camp in the canyon, arriving after midnight.

CHAPTER XXXI.

REINFORCED.

WHEN Buck Taylor returned to his camp he saw that the prisoner, notwithstanding the uncertainty of his fate, was sleeping soundly.

So he turned in to his blanket bed, yet not to sleep, for what he had witnessed weighed heavily upon him.

The man was a deeply-dyed villain, and deserved his fate.

He had sought to kill Buck Taylor, and had but met his own death at the hands of his adversary.

But the sight of the woman who loved the man, vile as he had been, kneeling at his grave in the moonlight, weeping for him dead, touched the heart of the Lasso King most deeply.

He was up early, however, and had breakfast cooked by the time dawn came, so that he could put out the fire so its tell-tale smoke would not be seen in the daylight.

He freed the man of his irons for awhile, gave him a chance to stretch his limbs and then again ironed him with the remark:

"I shall leave you here while I go to the hill-top yonder and watch for my friends."

"Do not move about for I shall send a bullet after you, as I am determined you shall not escape."

"How could I, Saddle King, with these irons on my feet and hands?"

"You are a slippery fellow and might take chances of getting away with the irons on—but don't try it."

With this Buck Taylor moved down the canyon and was soon upon a hill that commanded a view of the trail he had come.

He got into a position where he could be in hiding, and see any one passing, and then he spread his blanket upon the ground and prepared to take it easily.

He had thus passed several hours when he heard the sharp click of iron striking against rocks, and at once he was all attention, his eyes fixed upon the trail.

Almost instantly there came into view two horsemen, the sight of whom caused Buck Taylor to spring to his feet, throw his blanket across his arm and walk down toward the trail.

There were now seen half a dozen horsemen following the two in front.

The latter were Captain Hassan and Monte Joe, those following were cowboys from the Soldiers Retreat Ranch.

They all spied the Lasso King as soon as he left his covert and waved their hats, but did not cry out in welcome, well knowing that they were in a dangerous neighborhood, with the old Mission Ranch not three miles distant from the range where they then were.

As Buck Taylor walked down to the party who had halted and were awaiting him, he said:

"You are in good time, gentlemen."

"Drop into single file and I'll lead you to my den."

This they did, and upon reaching the brook, turned up-stream in single file, their horses thus leaving no tracks.

"Why, Buck, we were anxious about you, for you had some trouble on the way," Monte Joe said.

"Oh, no, the other man had the trouble, and is still that way, for I have him up the canyon."

"There, turn into this little stream now, and you'll soon be there."

Buck Taylor had walked along on the bank as the others rode into the stream, and as they entered the canyon he said:

"You'll find wood, water and grass in plenty here, enough to last a troop a week."

"Stake out your horses and come up to the camp."

This they did, and Captain Hassan and Monte Joe exchanged glances as they saw Tony Pickett sitting on his blanket, his hands and feet ironed, and his face looking very disconsolate.

"Howdy, gents?"

"I'm in a bad way, yer see," he said, with a melancholy smile.

"Yes, Pickett, you seem to have gotten into trouble at last, and my wonder has been that you were not hanged long ago," Monte Joe said.

"You know him then, Monte Joe?" Buck Taylor said.

"Why, yes, for he was one of the band that backed Tiger Tom when you had trouble with him, the night you captured him in the saloon."

"Then he was with Tiger Tom at his ranch when you had your duel?"

"Ah! I felt that I was not mistaken, though he tried to convince me that I was, and said he was a guide."

"Guide! well he did lead a train into trouble once, and came very near being hanged for it."

"He's a bad man, Buck, and how you roped him without killing him first I do not understand, for he's clever with his guns, and is game."

"I caught him off his guard, that was all."

"He was ambushed for me, but I flanked him."

"Now I have him, I advised that he make a clean breast of what he knows about Tiger Tom, for lariats are plenty here, now, and trees, too."

"Yes, and the men are here to use them," Monte Joe said.

"Buck, did you look to see if he had the Tiger brand?" asked Captain Hassan.

"The first thing, sir, and he has it."

"So he is one of the Tigers of Texas, of course?"

"Yes, sir, though he tells a very plausible story about how he got the brand," and Buck Taylor made known just what had been said by the prisoner as to the Star and Tiger in his hand.

Then he said:

"Well, I am reinforced now, so we can put him to the test to see whether he would rather live or die," and the prisoner turned deadly pale as he heard the words.

CHAPTER XXXII.

TRUE TO A VOW.

THE cowboys had staked the horses out in the canyon, and then gathered around the camp, where the prisoner sat upon his blanket, leaning against a tree.

He seemed to feel that he was one against many, that he was wholly at the mercy of the men who held him prisoner, and the thought had driven all the color from his face.

"We must eat a cold snack for dinner, and have a good hot supper, for I dare not build a fire here in the daylight," said Buck, and the cowboys soon got out their provisions, for Captain Hassan had come liberally supplied with food for a trip of days.

The prisoner had a good meal given him, and the irons were taken off of his wrists; but he seemed to have lost his appetite since the coming of the reinforcements.

He had a foreboding of evil to come to him.

When the meal was concluded, Buck Taylor said:

"Now, pards, let us arrange as to what is to be done with the prisoner."

All signified assent to this, and the Lasso King continued:

"Now, the man left Trail Crossing, I feel sure, to see who would follow the trail of Tiger Tom."

"He passed me in my camp at night, and I saw his trail when I went on my way in the morning."

"I feared an ambush, so went off the trail some distance, keeping parallel to it, and riding in every few miles to see if both Tiger Tom's and the fresh track held on as before."

"Upon one of these rides I saw the horse of the prisoner, so crept near and found him lying on his blanket at the top of a ridge—but you passed the spot."

"Yes, we saw your writing on the rock," said Captain Hassan.

"Well, he was in ambush for whoever would come along, only I came from behind, so caught him."

"I saw the brand he wears, and offered him his freedom and some money if he is willing to talk, to tell in fact all he knows about Tiger Tom and the Tigers of Texas."

"He vows he knows nothing, and so it rests with him to save his life, gain his freedom, or—submit to what punishment we may decide upon."

"There is but one thing to do with him, Buck."

"What is that, Monte Joe?"

"Hang him."

"But of what be I guilty, gents?" urged the prisoner, nervously.

"You are guilty upon general principles, Pickett, and if we hang you, as I suppose we shall, we will not go wrong, for you deserve it for your crimes in the past."

"I hain't done nothing."

"Well, we are not trying him, as I understand it, only offering him his freedom and his life if he tells us what he knows about the Tigers of Texas," Captain Hassan remarked.

"I don't know nothin' about 'em," sullenly said the man.

"Do you know Tiger Tom?" asked Buck Taylor.

The prisoner glanced at Monte Joe, and answered:

"Yes, and so does Monte Joe, and Buck Taylor."

"True, but you are supposed to be one of his band."

"What for?"

"That is just it, for there are a number of lawless deeds committed on the frontier all the time, and done by some secret band thoroughly organized and under an able leader."

"Now who are the men of this band, who is their leader?"

"I doesn't know, for I never heard of 'em."

"Now go slow, for you can rid the country of a gang of cut-throats and thieves, and get money by it, while you will also save your own life by the confession of all you know."

"I knows nothing about 'em."

"Where were you going on the trail I found you on?"

"On a hunt over toward the river."

"Whose trail was you were following?"

"I was not following no trail."

"Who were you lying in ambush for?"

"I was resting and thought maybe I'd get a shot at a deer."

"Well, Tony Pickett," said Monte Joe, who had done the questioning, you can lie with an ease that is refreshing; but just let me say to you that I know you as a pard of Tiger Tom; you were going to his ranch on some business, when captured by Buck Taylor, and you are just throwing your life away in refusing to answer the questions put to you."

"You has the power to hang me, and I suppose will do it," moaned the prisoner.

"Now answer me one question?"

"Waal, Monte Joe?"

"When did you see Tiger Tom last?"

"Three nights ago."

"Then he is not dead?"

"No more than I am."

"Where did you see him?"

"At Trail Crossing."

"The night he was there?"

"That same."

"And you say he is not dead?"

"Not he."

"And you do not belong to his band?"

"I does not."

"You have been to his ranch, I suppose?"

"Waal, I have passed by it."

"You know the way there?"

"Yes, I could go there."

"Then you shall guide us there."

"Lordy, Monte Joe, I doesn't know the way no better than the rest of yer does."

"Yet you were there with him the day of the duel, for I saw you, and as a good man, for so you call yourself, you must help us capture Tiger Tom."

"Pard, I can't do it."

"You will not, you mean?"

"Well, call it so."

"Then you shall hang if you do not."

"I can't help it, Monte Joe, I won't do as you asks."

"You are bound by a vow not to betray your comrades?"

The man was silent, and the question was repeated, but still he would not answer.

Then came the words:

"Men, bring a lariat here, for this man must hang."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A RESPITE.

THE prisoner shrank as from a chill blast, under the words of Monte Joe, into whose hands Buck Taylor had placed the questioning of the man, as he saw that he stood in greatest awe of the gambler.

"I must hang?" he asked, or rather uttered in a tone that was pitiful.

"Yes, Pickett, for the situation is just this:

"The State of Texas is receiving considerable emigration, and yet the rumor goes abroad that they do not protect the new-comers."

"There are the Indians which the Government has to contend against, and besides keeping these back, there is to deal with lawless raiders from beyond the Rio Grande."

"Then in our midst we have a wild community who care nothing for law and order, and then take advantage to kill and plunder the ranchmen whenever there is a chance to do so."

"Now, Tiger Tom was, if dead, is if living, a very bad type of a Texan."

"A cattleman himself, he has always created a disturbance when coming to the settlements, and after his duel with Buck Taylor here, a complete peace seemed to fall upon the border here."

"That he was recently the head of a secret gang of outlaws we have no doubt, and as soon as he was reported not dead, that he had reappeared, a raid was made upon the lower settlements, and cattle were run off, ranches plundered and a wagon-train attacked and robbed."

"His band scattered, to return to their haunts in the settlements, and three of them boldly sought to kidnap Captain Hassan's daughter."

"They failed to do so, and they were justly and promptly hanged."

"Now, you were with Tiger Tom, you left Trail Crossing after he was there, following upon his trail, and you lay in ambush to kill whoever followed him."

"I know you as a bad man, as a comrade of the Tiger of Texas and that brand in your hand proves you to be one of the secret league of outlaws."

"If you confess the truth, aid us to put down the lawless band, your life shall be spared and you can leave Texas with a snug little sum in your pockets to start you in an honest life, if you care to follow one, elsewhere."

"As you refuse, then you must hang, for we shall wipe out utterly the Tigers of Texas, for we are on their trail, and Buck Taylor and his League of Lasso-Throwers, whom you know something of, are enlisted in the good work, with the army to back him."

"Now what do you say?"

Monte Joe had spoken clearly, and in a manner that could not but impress the prisoner with all that he said as at least being intended for a fair statement of the situation.

The cowboys all regarded the man intently, for they wondered if the bonds that held him to

outlawry were too strong to break even to save his own life.

Captain Hassan also added, as the man remained silent:

"Come, my man, cast off this yoke that you are under, for it holds you to a cause that is criminal, and save your conscience by confessing the truth and becoming our ally."

But still the prisoner uttered no word, and Buck Taylor said:

"See here, pard, be a man."

"I treated you as such, though you were my prisoner, and had sought my life like an assassin."

"Come which shall it be?"

"I have no answer to make, and as you have the power, so you kin hang me."

"I'll have ter die, I guess."

All looked into the face of the man and saw determined resolve upon every feature.

Still Monte Joe wished to test him still further and said:

"Conley, there is your man to hang."

"Select a tree and swing him up."

"In irons, sir?" asked the cowboy.

"Yes, just as he is," sternly answered Monte Joe.

Conley stepped away from the crowd and soon selected a tree.

Then he called to two of his men, who taking hatchets from their saddles, began to dig into the earth, the shape showing soon that it was a grave.

A long lariat was then thrown over the limb of the tree stretching out over the grave, and a horse without saddle, was led up for the prisoner to mount.

He was led forward now, and aided to mount the horse, while the noose was then placed about his neck, the other end of the lariat being thrown over the limb, beneath which the animal was led.

The lariat was then drawn taut and made fast, so that when the horse, by a sharp blow, was made to bound away the rider would be left dangling in the air.

Buck Taylor, Monte Joe and Captain Hassan stood near, the gambler with his watch in his hand.

"All ready, sir," said Conley.

"Have you anything to say, Pickett, any last request, or word to your kindred?" asked the gambler.

"No, Monte Joe, those who loved me believe me dead, for so I let them believe, so I would have them think."

"I have nothing to say, except good-by all."

The gambler glanced at Buck Taylor and Captain Hassan and then said:

"Conley, I will not execute the man to-day."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE MYSTERY DEEPENS.

"God bless you, Monte Joe!" came in fervent tones from the lips of the prisoner, and when, though deadly pale, he had not flinched with the noose about his neck, the revulsion from death to life was so great, that now the tears dimmed his eyes and rolled down his bronzed cheeks.

There was not a man present who was not moved at the sight, for the pluck of the doomed prisoner had won their admiration.

He was taken back to camp by Conley, and all the cowboys seemed glad of his escape.

"He would never have betrayed his comrades," Buck Taylor said to Monte Joe and the captain.

"Never! he would have died with his lips closed," Captain Hassan responded.

"I thought that before the last test, yet hoped he would yield, so gave him the opportunity," the gambler remarked.

"Well, what is to be done with him?"

"I'll take him in charge and hold him prisoner at the ranch," said Captain Hassan.

"That will be best, and perhaps kindness may do what fear would not."

"The fellow is game, knows he is guilty, and might be made useful if we can get him to aid us."

"Yes, Monte Joe, and I have a plan that may bring him round, after he has been a few days a prisoner! but now let me tell you of my experience at the Mission Ranch."

"Have you been there, Buck?" asked Monte Joe in surprise.

"Yes, and I'll tell you all about it as soon as we have seen that poor devil made comfortable, for I really have taken a fancy to him," and he walked over to where the prisoner was and said:

"Pickett, I'll relieve you of your irons, except on one foot, and that one I must make fast to something you cannot run away with, yet move about camp."

"You are a plucky fellow, and you should be well treated at least."

"I thank yer, Buck Taylor, indeed I does, and all of yer fer not hanging me, for bad as I has been I don't wish ter die, though what I've ter live for I doesn't know."

"Maybe some day, if I escapes hanging, I'll change my way of living."

"I hope so, at least," and with this Buck Taylor relieved the man of his irons except around one foot, the other manacle being made fast

around a piece of wood which the prisoner could move but slowly with.

Then the cowboy chief returned to where Monte Joe and Captain Hassan awaited him, the former having remarked:

"That brave fellow, Taylor, has the heart of a woman in him and the courage of a lion."

"He has indeed, and though a perfect devil in action, he can never harm a foe at his mercy."

"He has been, from what he said, already up to Mission Ranch, captain."

"Without a doubt, and has made some discovery of importance, I am sure; but here he comes."

Buck Taylor now came up, and throwing himself upon his blanket, said:

"I rather like that scamp."

"He was not naturally a villain, but has been driven to his life by circumstances beyond his control, perhaps."

"At any rate, he may be useful yet, and my conscience would have troubled me to have hanged him, for it is circumstantial evidence alone that we have against him."

"But now to tell you of my visit to the Mission Ranch."

"I thought you were not to go alone, Buck?"

"No, Monte Joe, I was not to get into any trouble, that was it, until I had you near to help me out."

"To keep out of temptation I went on foot, leaving my horse here, and did not go to the ranch proper."

"I made a flank movement, to get to lee of the dogs, and crept up to the little patch of pines where I knew Tiger Tom was buried."

"If dead," said the gambler, with a sly glance at Captain Hassan.

"My word for it, you found his grave," the captain rejoined.

"It is just what I did find."

"I wanted to see if it was there, and I had reached the edge of the pines when I saw some one approaching."

"I crouched down behind a rock, and who do you think it was?"

"It could only have been his ghost, seeing that he is dead."

"No, captain."

"Then Tiger Tom himself."

"No, Monte Joe."

"I give it up."

"Ditto."

"It was his wife."

"Ah!"

"Going to an empty grave, eh, or did she do it for effect, knowing you were looking at her?" and the captain smiled as he saw the gambler's look.

"She did not see me or know of my presence; but she went to that grave, dropped down upon her knees and sobbed like a child, while she called the name of her husband again and again."

"I tell you, my friends, it gave me the strangest pain in my heart I ever felt, and I would have fled the spot could I have done so; but she stayed there for half an hour, then bent over and pressed her lips to the grave, and walked away."

"I waited until she was out of sight in the moonlight, and then went to the grave."

"It was covered with wild flowers, and no headstone; but I left it and came back here fully convinced that you are right, Captain Hassan, and that I did kill Tiger Tom, and his body now lies in that grave."

"What do you say now, Monte Joe?"

"That, remarkable as it seems, that two such men should exist, I am convinced that *Tiger Tom has a double*," was the response of Monte Joe.

CHAPTER XXXV.

SECRET VISITORS.

THE more that the three friends talked over the matter the more they were mystified.

There sat not over earshot from them Tony Pickett, who they believed could enlighten them upon all they desired to know about the Tigers of Texas, and yet his mouth was sealed, as they had had reason to discover.

"We are in a quandary," Buck Taylor frankly admitted, but he and Monte Joe also had decided that Captain Hassan was right, that Tiger Tom was certainly dead.

But who then was this man whom all who had seen of late had pronounced Tiger Tom?

That was the secret that they had set out to discover, but thus far without avail.

"I'll tell you," at last said Monte Joe:

"Suppose we three go to the place to-night, as you did last night, Buck."

"I am with you."

"As I am," said Captain Hassan.

"We can take two of the boys along, now I think of it, with a spade and shovel, and have a look into the grave."

"Yes, that will surely decide," Captain Hassan said.

So it was agreed that after nightfall they should go with two of the cowboys to have a look at the one who lay in the grave.

When dark came on a fire was built, and a good supper was cooked and eaten.

Then it was decided that three cowboys should accompany them, and they were to go mounted.

Out of the canyon then rode the party, and taking the direction of the wind they moved around to a position to bring them up against it, so that the dogs should not catch the scent.

They approached as near the hill as they dared in the moonlight, halting at a group of a dozen trees that grew about a prairie spring.

Here they left the horses under care of one of the cowboys, who had orders to remain mounted, holding the reins of all the horses, ready to ride rapidly to the rescue if he should hear their call for help.

Then on foot they went forward, separating so as not to make a dark mass that could be seen quicker than one would be.

So they moved across the moonlit prairie some distance apart, and toward the hill that rose dark and silent a third of a mile away.

The base of the hill was reached, and then Buck Taylor led the way up its steep sides, the way he had gone the night before.

They reached the group of rocks, and peering over, Buck Taylor, who was leading, held up his hand as a caution, and all stood still.

Then to their ears came the sound of a woman sobbing.

They crept to the top of the rocks, which were in the shadow, and then they beheld at the grave the bent form of the woman.

"Oh, Tom! Tom! my whole life is a wreck, now that you are gone!" she cried, and her words distinctly fell upon the ears of each one of the group of men.

For long minutes they remained there, while the woman mourned her dead.

At last she bent, as on the night before, and pressed her lips to the grave.

Then she rose and walked slowly away, disappearing in the shadows growing around the cabin on the hilltop.

"Taylor," said Captain Hassan, in a tone that showed he had felt deeply what he had seen, "I will not be one to disturb that grave."

"Nor I," firmly responded Monte Joe.

"I am glad to have you both say so, for I cannot believe that we need further proof of Tiger Tom's death," said the Lasso King.

"That is just my idea, for that woman is not weeping over an empty grave, nor over one who is not the man she loved."

"Tiger Tom has a double."

"Great heavens! now I think of it, was the man I killed the Tiger of Texas, or the man who is now at large?" Buck Taylor asked anxiously.

"That we must find out, Buck, for if Tiger Tom has a double then he too must be run to earth," Monte Joe said, in his decided way.

They then crept forward to the grave, gazed at its surroundings, and noted that a well-worn path led from there to the cabin on the hilltop.

Quietly then they went back down the hillside, crossed the prairie to their waiting horses, and mounting rode slowly back to camp.

As they went along they discussed the situation over and over again, until Buck Taylor at last said:

"Well, I shall go to the ranch to-morrow."

"Do you mean alone?"

"Yes, I shall stop, as though upon my way to Trail City, and see the woman and discover all that I can without rudeness."

"See here, Buck?"

"Yes, Monte Joe."

"I do not think that the widow of Tiger Tom would take it as a compliment to have the slayer of her husband make her a visit, while by your going she would suspect that you had heard of this ghost of the Tiger of Texas roaming about, and was on a reconnoitering expedition to see just what you could find out before striking another blow."

"Now I could stop there, as though coming from Fort S—, and bound home to Trail Crossing."

"Yes, Buck, I'll go, and you can all await me in camp."

"I think Monte Joe is right, Buck," said Captain Hassan.

And so it was arranged that Monte Joe should alone visit the ranch of the old Mission.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A MAN FROM MEXICO.

THE scene goes back to the lone and beautiful woman of the Mission Ranch, where she hoisted the flag with its field of scarlet and gold star in the center.

It was run up just at twilight, and when the morning sun arose, its rosy hues were floating out against the sky, rising above the tallest trees that crossed the hilltop.

The night had passed with both the beautiful woman and the old negress alone in the ranch, and yet the former seemed to feel no fear, and if the latter did she was wise enough not to show it to her mistress.

The cattle were turned out of the corral in the morning, several hundred in number, with half a hundred really very fine horses, and they wended their way down the steep trail to the prairie, the fair mistress of the ranch mounted and acting as herder.

When she returned to the cabin the negress

had her breakfast ready for her, which she ate in silence.

"Missy Valerie, don't yer think ye'r' gwine ter be awful lonesome here all alone on de ranch?" asked the negress, with one thought for her mistress and two for herself.

"We will not be all alone, auntie, for I've set the signal that will bring us company soon."

"I'm awful glad to hear dat, missy, for your sake— Lor' dere come a man up de trail now."

Valerie arose and went to the door, and her eyes fell upon a horseman approaching.

He had reached the stockade gate, for a log wall surrounded the cabin and top of the hill, and half a dozen savage-looking dogs were making toward him, when a call from their mistress brought them back and sent them to the rear of the house.

The man was well mounted, thoroughly armed and wore the dress of a cowboy.

His face was bold, intelligent and deeply bronzed.

As he rode up he raised his broad slouch hat and said:

"This is the ranch of Tiger Tom, miss?"

"Yes, but the ranchero is dead."

"Dead! Tiger Tom dead?" the man said in a tone of surprise that was not feigned.

"Where have you been the past few months that you did not know of his death?"

"In Mexico, miss, where he sent me upon a special mission."

"Were you never here before?"

"One night I stopped here for an hour for orders from him, on my way to Mexico."

"Ah! you are the man whom I have heard spoken of as Dagger Don?" and Valerie glanced at a long-bladed dagger worn in a scabbard in his jacket just over the heart, and the hilt of which sparkled with gems.

"Yes, miss, I am Dagger Don, and you—"

"Am the widow of Tiger Tom."

"I have heard him speak of you often, and he feared you had been killed or—"

"Or what, madam?"

"Betrayed his trust, as so many have done."

"Oh, no, there is honor among thieves in my creed, and I live up to it."

"He sent me on a mission of danger and importance, and I accomplished it."

"Ah! I am glad of that, sir; but will you dismount and come in, for you have not had breakfast?"

"No, madam, and I thank you."

"But may I ask why the signal flag is set if the chief is dead?"

"I dismissed all who were here, and there are others of the band I wish to employ, so I hoisted the signal flag to have all come who saw it, and then I could select those I need."

"I trust you will not overlook me, madam; but let me give you proof that I am he whom I say."

"See, there in my left hand is the star and tiger brand of our League, and in my right you see a dagger, with the name *Don* on the hilt."

"I did not doubt you, sir, and let me prove that I was in my husband's confidence by telling you that he sent you to Mexico to kidnap a certain wealthy banker, and demand ransom for his release."

"It was Senor Dolario, and you were to ask twenty thousand pesos for his ransom."

"You are right, Lady Chief, as I now must call you, and I have with me the amount of ransom intact in Mexican bank-notes, for I asked five thousand pesos more, and they paid all expenses, for I had to hire a number of men to play my game to win."

"You are an honest man, Dagger Don, and I shall be most glad to have you remain here as— my lieutenant."

"I thank you, Lady Chief."

"I shall need just such a wise head and good nerve as yours to guide me in what I have in view, for if the Tiger of Texas is dead, the *Tigress yet lives!*" and she spoke almost fiercely.

Then she turned suddenly upon the horseman and asked in a voice that quivered with suppressed feeling:

"Dagger Don, do you believe that the dead come back to earth again?"

The man fairly started at the question, for the woman seemed so terribly in earnest.

"Answer me!"

"I should hope not, Lady Chief, for it would hurt me cruelly to have to face some whom I have seen die."

"Then you have never seen a—ghost?"

"No, Lady Chief, I have not."

"You have heard men say that they have seen ghosts?"

"I have, and men who believed what they said."

"Well, I have seen a ghost—but come in and get your breakfast, and then, in the broad glare of the sunlight, I will prove to you that I saw the dead walking once more on earth."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

HAUNTED.

THE man from Mexico seemed surprised at the surroundings of the cabin and its very comfortable interior.

It certainly did not appear like a home on the frontier, with no other ranch within thirty miles.

Then, too, this young and beautiful widow of the dead chief, refined, and as courtly in her manners as though in a *salon* among her aristocratic acquaintance, was a puzzle and a study to him.

He had seen a different life himself, ere he became a lawless prairie wanderer, and wondered at this fascinating woman, one who could adorn any home, being content to hide away here on the Texas prairies.

If she loved her husband, he could understand her remaining there, and he felt that when Tiger Tom had wished, he could be all that a woman would love; but he could not comprehend why she should remain after the death of the man whose wife she had been, unless it was to be near his grave.

She had told him she wished his services, and she should have them, come what might.

He ate his breakfast with a relish that he had not enjoyed for a long while, for the negress was an excellent cook, and china and silver service, with a snow-white cloth and napkin was something he had a remembrance of in the past, yet had not seen in many a long year.

The woman would live in luxury, no matter what were her surroundings.

When the meal was over she led the way out upon the piazza, and putting on her sombrero, said simply:

"Come with me, Dagger Don."

He walked along with her down the trail toward the pines where was the grave of Tiger Tom.

He reverently removed his sombrero as he approached, and gazing down upon the mound covered with flowers, said sadly:

"Poor Tiger Tom! he was a good friend to me."

Valerie saw that the words came from his heart, that they were not said for effect; but she watched him closely, and a moment after, as though casting a retrospective glance, he said:

"I met him two years ago, one night in Trail Crossing, and he saved my life."

"I shall never forget him for it, for some men followed me from the saloon to kill and rob me, as I had been a large winner at cards."

"He came up as I was being worsted, and saved my life and my money."

"Then I became his friend," and then turning to Valerie he continued:

"And I shall be just as devoted to your interests, Lady Chief."

"I can believe that, Dagger Don; but now let me explain my question to you by the grave of my husband, if you believe in ghosts."

"Yes, Lady Chief, I am ready to hear all you have to say."

"Now there lies my husband, and yet last night I saw him face to face."

"A fancy of your brain, Lady Chief."

"No, it was no fancy."

"Where was it?"

"I came here, as is my wont, to his grave, and then went up to supper."

"I had discharged all on the ranch because I wished to begin life anew, to carry out certain plans I had in view, and I desired other men to serve me than those I had."

"I kept only the negress who is my friend as well as servant."

"I was seated in the moonlight upon the piazza when I suddenly saw a form come out of the timber toward the cabin."

"The dogs did not hear or see him, or at least none of them gave cry, or appeared."

"Were you thinking of the chief?"

"Yes."

"And you were alone?"

"Yes, and what I saw was my husband."

"Impossible!"

"It is the truth, for you know he was no man to have a counterpart."

"He came straight toward me, and I sprang to my feet, drawing the revolver from my belt and called out to him in my alarm to halt and throw up his hands, be he man or ghost."

"And the result, Lady Chief?"

"I felt myself swaying to and fro, my eyes grew dim and I remembered no more until I found old auntie bending over me in great fright."

"She had heard my cry, and ran to my aid."

"Now what do you think of that, Dagger Don?"

"I can only say as I did before, Lady Chief, that it was a vision summoned up by your heated imagination."

"Why has it not appeared to me before?"

"Has it not?"

"No, not even after the first days of his burial."

"Did you see him killed, Lady Chief?"

"Yes, and it was in this way."

"He came home from Trail Crossing, feeling sure that his ranch was to be attacked by the Cowboy League under their leader, Buck Taylor, known as the Saddle King."

"I know him, and a wonderful man he is."

"There is no denying that fact; but he and Tiger Tom had had some trouble at Trail Cross-

ing, and so the chief ordered the men to the ranch here."

"The next day Buck Taylor and his cowboys surrounded the place, and demanded the surrender of the chief."

"As it was a question where he was the one wanted, Tiger Tom challenged the Saddle King to a duel with lariats, the challenge was accepted, and they met yonder on the prairie, in full view from the piazza of my house," and the woman buried her head in her hands as though to shut off the remembrance of the tragic scene.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

AN APPARITION.

DAGGER DON said not a word to break in upon the woman's grief, at recalling the story of the duel.

After a few moments she continued:

"I believe I am credited with a nerve of iron, by those who best know me, and of control over my feelings, and yet I feel that affair even more keenly now than ever before."

"Whatever Thomas Tracey was, I loved him, and now I recall only his goodness to me."

"Well, to my story."

"The challenge, as I said, was accepted by the Saddle King, and wielding a lasso as he did, Tiger Tom seemed sure of victory, though since, I have thought he had a foreboding of his fate."

"The men rode out with him, forming a line in front of the hill, and the cowboys had already formed facing them, and Buck Taylor had with him an equal force with the chief's men, and also the ranchero of Soldier's Retreat, and a gambler by the name of Monte Joe."

"The former I have heard of, the latter I know," said Dagger Don.

"But why need I dwell upon the fearful scene, for they met, and brave, desperate and skillful as Tiger Tom was, the Texan cowboy chief proved his master, for he lassoed him, dragged him from his horse, and the fall and bounding forward of the Saddle King's horse killed my husband."

"You are sure?"

"Ah, yes, too sure."

"Did you see him buried?"

"I did."

"And the Saddle King?"

"Sent Monte Joe, the gambler, to me with Tiger Tom's body, borne on a litter by cowboys."

"That was kind in him, at least."

"Yes, I have not one word to say against the Lasso King, for he met and fought my husband as a brave man should, and I am sure felt for me in his heart."

"Now you know the story of the duel."

"But the men?"

"They were forced, by the terms of the compact between the Lasso King and my husband, to go their way, and I saw that the arrangement was not broken."

"A few I kept here, until I decided upon my course for the future, and then I allowed them to depart."

"Now, I wish you to aid me in my plans, and you shall not be the loser by it; but first, what is your solution of my seeing my husband as I did last night?"

"As I told you, Lady Chief, it was a hallucination."

"But it was bright moonlight, and I saw him as distinctly as I see you now."

"I do not believe it will occur again."

"We will see to-night, for I wish you to be on the watch, too."

"Certainly."

"You do not believe in ghosts?"

"Not in the least."

"Where will you lie hidden to-night?"

"You were upon the piazza, you say, Lady Chief?"

"Yes."

"And he came up the walk to you."

"He came in at the gate in the stockade wall, for I saw him cross the open space yonder in the moonlight, as though he had come from there."

"And then?"

"He walked up within fifteen feet of me, and halted at my call to him, be he mortal or ghost, to throw up his hands."

"Then I will lie concealed at the stockade fence, in the shadow of some rushes I noticed there, and if he comes to-night, ghost or mortal, I shall lariat him, and we will know the truth."

"I shall be glad to, and it encourages me to feel that you know no fear."

"I hope to prove it, Lady Chief, but I must turn over to you the money belonging to the chief, for yours it is, as I went upon his mission, and then please explain to me what your plans are for the future."

"We will return to the house and talk it over; but shall I leave the signal flag flying?"

"No, for what men we need I can go to Trail Crossing and the other settlements and select them, and if they come in response to the signal flag there may be some whom we do not wish."

"Very true," and Valerie led the way back to the cabin, where she made known her plans, whatever they were, to Dagger Don.

The day passed slowly away, and Dagger

Don drove the cattle toward night into the corral, and then went in to supper.

It was just twilight when the woman came out upon the piazza.

She had eaten very little and seemed strangely nervous for her.

She recalled with some misgivings the specter she had seen the night before, and appeared to dread the ordeal through which she must pass, for she seemed to feel that she would surely behold the apparition again.

Dagger Don took his stand to one side of the stockade gate, and in the shadow of a bush.

He had his lariat in his hand, and his revolvers were in his belt, but Valerie had said:

"Do not fire, I beg of you, for—"

But she could not or would not finish the sentence.

Then she took her seat upon the piazza, and where the moonlight fell upon her.

The moon was three quarters full, and so had risen early.

Now it shed its silvery light over prairie and hill, and soon, from out the shadows of the timber advanced the tall form.

"My God! there he comes!"

"It is, yes it is *Thomas Tracey's ghost!*" came in thrilling accents from the lips of the woman, and as she sought to rise she tottered and sunk to the floor in a swoon, while the tall form advanced quickly to her side, and behind him came Dagger Don.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

MONTE JOE PLAYS A LONE HAND.

THE camp was reached in safety by the party who had left the canyon to visit the grave of Tiger Tom, and in fact to unearth the remains therein, to see if it was really the body of the Ranchero Desperado.

The three friends, the Lasso King, Captain Hassan and Monte Joe, talked together for an hour around the camp-fire, after their return to the camp in the canyon, and it could not be decided other than that Monte Joe should go to the Mission.

Buck Taylor felt that it was far better that he should go, for as he said, the risk would be great.

"It will not be the first time I have played a lone hand, Buck, and the risk will be less for me than for you, as I did not kill Tiger Tom, and, really, the men at the ranch can have nothing against me."

"Well, I shall take a position on the ridge where I can see you, Monte Joe, and keep my glass upon you."

"The men must be ready to ride to your aid in an instant, if you need us, and you need only ride into view and wave your hat three times around your head, and we will come, be the odds what they may."

"I hope I shall not need you, Buck; but if I do I shall signal as you suggest."

"Now let us get some rest," and the party turned in for the night, not even a guard being placed, so sure were all that their retreat was unknown, and their presence in the locality also.

When the sun rose Monte Joe crawled out from his blankets, as he said, "as fresh as a daisy."

He ate a good breakfast, then sat down and put his weapons in perfect condition, and having to ride around so as to appear to come from the trail through the upper ridge, and which led to Fort S—, he started early.

Captain Hassan and Buck Taylor accompanied him around the ridge for half the distance, and then returning to camp the ranchero ordered the cowboys in readiness for a quick move, saying that the prisoner would also be taken along to look like one more in the party at least, as he would not be known to be in irons.

Buck Taylor meanwhile had gone to a high point of the ridge, where he could command a view of the prairie and the old Mission Hill.

With his fine field-glass he could see about the cabins very distinctly, and he soon was watching to see just what was going on there.

He saw Captain Hassan and his cowboys, with the prisoner, take position below, and his horse was led by one of the men, as he could make quicker time on foot down the hill from where he was, than mounted.

Having placed his men, Captain Hassan dismounted, and, by a flank movement, gained the rear of the Lasso King, who had seen him coming.

"Well, Buck, have you seen anything of interest about the place?"

"No, sir, not a soul is stirring."

"They drove the cattle down to the prairie before I took position here, but I can see no one watching them, or the herd of ponies either, though I guess the herders are up on the hill."

"Doubtless, as they would hardly leave a valuable herd without a guard."

"Hardly, sir; but still I can see no one."

"Wait until Monte Joe comes in sight, and then mark if his coming creates any disturbance."

"I will, sir."

"Do you know, Buck, that I am very much attached to Gambler Joe?"

"As I am, sir, for I look upon him as being as square a man as I ever met."

"He is all of that, Buck, and as brave a one, while he has a remarkable nerve."

"He has, indeed, sir."

"But do you know I feel that there is some deep mystery overhanging the man?"

"Without a doubt, sir."

"He will give no other name than Monte Joe, and told both my wife and Belle that he cared not to be known by any other name."

"So he told me, sir."

"You do not know his other name, Buck?"

"I do not, sir, and the man is as much a mystery to me as to you."

"He has, the air of having been an army officer, and a good deal of the military bearing, while he is generous and whole-souled to a fault."

"Yes, sir; but did you take notice of his affair with that man in the saloon the other night?"

"I did, particular notice."

"The man seemed to seek the game with him, I thought, to get rid of him."

"So it struck me, Buck."

"And when he held him covered Monte Joe showed not the slightest emotion, while he caught him off his guard by one of the boldest and cleverest tricks I ever saw."

"It was splendidly done, but Monte Joe had a very close call."

"He did indeed, Captain Hassan; but when in his room he showed that he knew the man and all about him."

"Yes, and that he had put up counterfeit money."

"I observed that, as well as the fact that he took the man's papers, and all that he had on his person for some special reason."

"Yes, Monte Joe is a mystery, which he does not even give us the solution of; but there he comes."

Far across the prairie now was visible a horseman coming from the range line miles away.

He was directing his course along the trail which wound around the hill where Tiger Tom's house was, and which, however, left it a mile away, for the name of the place as having been haunted had caused all people going that way to keep some distance off, and so the trail ran.

"Keep your glass upon the ranch now, Buck, and I will watch Monte Joe," said Captain Hassan.

The Lasso King was already watching the ranch through his glass, and yet made no report of seeing any one as the gambler branched off from the main trail and headed directly for the hill.

"I do not see a soul moving yet," said Buck Taylor.

Nor did he when Monte Joe ascended the steep trail to the top of the hill and disappeared in the timber.

"Now we must watch close, for Monte Joe is indeed playing a lone hand there," Buck Taylor said earnestly.

CHAPTER XL.

IN THE LAIR OF THE TIGER.

MONTE JOE knew all that he undertook in going alone to the old Mission Ranch.

If Tiger Tom was yet alive, which he had every reason to doubt, it would be dangerous in the extreme, as he and the Rancho Desperado were foes, and had been ever since Buck Taylor's arrest of the man at Trail Crossing.

If the man was dead, then he would have some of his people to deal with, if they suspected his motive, and his position would be a perilous one.

"Well," he said, with a little reckless laugh, "if I am wiped out, the retribution which Buck Taylor will visit upon them will be a relief in my dying hour."

He eyed the place closely as he approached it, and was ready to fight or run, as he decided would be best, for he had no idea of being shot down in an uneven fight, if by flight he could gain safety, and with Buck Taylor near he felt that he was well sustained, for Captain Hassan and his cowboys would stand by the side of the Lasso King to the last.

The fear of an ambush also entered the mind of the gambler, for he left no act of caution undone.

Up the steep trail he advanced, glancing at the herd of cattle as he went, and the horses, which were all fine animals, and in good condition.

As he neared the stockade gate his coming was announced by the loud barking of a dog, and the whole pack came savagely toward him until recalled by the negress, when she saw he was alone.

His coming had evidently not been seen up to the time the dog barked.

He rode up to the hitching-rack, dismounted, and, as he turned toward the cabin, Mrs. Tracey appeared upon the piazza.

She was dressed in a most becoming buckskin suit, the skirt rather short, leggings fringed up the outer seam, and the bodice braided and beaded.

Upon her head was a silver-embroidered sombrero of gray, and about her slender waist was a red silk sash encircling the belt in which were her revolvers.

A more beautiful woman and becoming costume it would be hard to find, and the gambler gazed upon her with undisguised admiration.

He raised his sombrero, and there was something very fascinating in his smile and courtly manners, as he asked:

"Shall I have to introduce myself again to Mrs. Tracey as Monte Joe the gambler, or does she honor me by remembering me?"

"Yours is not a face to forget, Mr. Monte Joe, and I remember you perfectly, as also that I owe you gratitude for your kindness to me."

"You are welcome to my house, sir."

"I thank you, for I was on my trail southward and so took the liberty of stopping, though I hardly expected to find you here, madam?"

"Sit down, please, and we'll have a talk together before dinner, and your horse shall be cared for at once."

"Permit me to see to his comfort," and Monte Joe was moving away when she placed her hand upon his arm and said:

"No, you are my guest, and I will have him cared for."

As she spoke she placed a bone whistle to her lips and gave three sharp calls.

"Sit down now, and tell me why you did not expect to find me here, Mr.—Mr.—"

"I have only the name of Monte Joe, madam, and friends and foes all call me by it without any prefix, so will you not do the same, please?"

"As friend or foe?" she asked archly.

"I could only wish for your friendship and fear your enmity," he answered pleasantly.

Just then a cowboy came from the rear of the cabin and the woman said:

"Take the gentleman's horse and care well for him, Veazey."

"He will not need him again to-day."

"Pardon me, yes, but I must be on my way in a couple of hours, thank you."

"I should be glad to have you remain longer, at your will?"

"Thank you, no, I must go on my trail again to-day."

The man led the horse away, and Monte Joe muttered to himself, as his hostess went to give some order about dinner:

"Now I am afoot and in close quarters, if they spring a trap upon me."

"But I must have it out."

His hostess returned and persisted in her question, which twice she had asked before:

"And now, Monte Joe, for so you would have me call you, why did you not expect to find me here?"

"I supposed that you would hardly care to remain here alone."

"Ah! after the death of my husband, you mean?"

"Yes, I thought so."

"Well, I am not alone, for I have the faithful old negress with me as a companion as well as servant, and there are three men on the place, one as man-of-all-work, and the other two as cowboys, so you see I am not unprotected."

"I have some five hundred head of cattle, half a hundred horses, and all the comforts of a home within civilization, while I must confess that I really like this wild life upon the plains, with its spice of danger."

"But suppose the Indians should come here upon a raid?"

"I believe we could beat them off, few as we are."

"And the Mexican raiders, who sometimes make a dash upon Texas ranches and settlements."

"We would beat them off, too, for our position is a strong one, sir."

"True, but you are a brave woman to risk such perils, and to live here as you do."

"Do you see that group of pines on the hillside, yonder, Monte Joe?"

"Yes, madam," and Monte Joe looked in the direction indicated.

"Well, under their shadow can be found the secret that keeps me here," she said in a tone that the gambler could not but understand.

CHAPTER XLI.

IN A QUANDARY.

THAT Valerie, in pointing to the pines, referred to the grave of her husband, Monte Joe knew, and he said not a word in response.

But his eyes were bent searchingly upon the face of the woman, as though to read if she were playing a part.

What he read in the face seemed to him to be unfeigned sorrow, and he recalled the scene of the night before when they had seen her sobbing at the grave among the pines.

"Yes, Monte Joe, it is to be near my dead that keeps me here."

"Whatever Tiger Tom, as you knew my husband, was to others, to me he was all gentleness and loving kindness."

"We loved each other at sight years ago, and he won me because I regarded him as the noblest specimen of manhood I had ever seen."

"I threw away offers of wealth to wed him whom I loved."

"We were poor, and yet we were happy until misfortune overtook us."

"We came here to live, and began life in a small way."

"Fortune smiled upon us, and then came sorrows, for my husband was given to reckless orgies, and a desperate man at such times, as you have reason to know, he was accused of all the crimes in the calendar, and called an outlaw, desperado and all that was bad."

"Then he was considered to be Trescott the Deserter and hounded down by those who sought blood-money offered for the murderer of the paymaster, Tom Trescott, and you know the end, for you witnessed it."

"He was killed, fairly, mind you, I say, in the duel with your friend Taylor the Lasso King, but he died as Tom Trescott the Deserter, and the blood-money was paid upon his head, when he was Thomas Tracey."

"But he is dead, and lies yonder among the pines, and I remain to be near his grave."

"I go to it each day and night, and that duty done I am the more content to struggle on here for riches, for gold is the hero I draw to my heart now, and my ranch will yet make me a rich woman, and riches are power untold, Monte Joe."

"Now, you see I have confessed to you why I remain here in the old Mission Ranch, haunted by cruel memories and phantoms of the long ago, and later by the wild life and death of my husband, Tiger Tom."

"But to change the subject," and her voice, before plaintive, suddenly became vivacious.

"What is going on in Trail Crossing?"

"It goes on in the uneven tenor of its way, Mrs. Tracey, as before, though there was a startling rumor there the other night."

"Indeed! and may I know it?"

"It will give you pain, I fear, for it was said that your husband was not dead."

"My husband not dead?" she exclaimed, in a tone of horror.

"So said the rumor, and I saw men who talked with one in Trail Crossing, and said that it was Tiger Tom."

"Surely, Monte Joe, this is some trickery, some hideous attempt at a joke."

"It would seem not, Mrs. Tracey, for that a man came there who resembled your husband in a startling degree, in size, appearance, voice, and even dress and outfit, is certain."

"Nay, more: he registered on the hotel book as Tiger Tom, and it is no wonder that he was thus supposed to be your husband."

The woman sprung to her feet and paced to and fro.

Her face had become very pale, and her lips were set firmly together.

Suddenly she turned toward the gambler and said:

"Monte Joe, you saw my husband killed."

"You brought his dead body here to me, sent by the man who killed him, and who was thus kind to me, a man whom I regard with admiration and respect, in spite of the blow he struck at my heart, my life."

"You know that my husband is dead, so give the lie to those rumors, or—"

"Or what, Mrs. Tracey?"

"Or, if such an apparition appears, regard it as—"

"As what, Mrs. Tracey?"

"A specter!"

"But, Mrs. Tracey, you do not believe in such nonsense as ghosts?"

"I did not, no."

"But can two such men have lived as was Tom Tracey?"

"If there is such a one seen now, it is Tiger Tom's spirit."

The gambler was nonplused at this, and did not know what to say.

Suddenly the woman again turned to him and said:

"Do you know I have seen that—phantom ghost—specter—spirit, or whatever it may be?"

"It came here one night, and you may know how startled I was at seeing before me what I deemed the face and form of my husband."

"I fainted, and when consciousness came to me again it was gone."

"Now, let us talk of something else," and as quickly as before she changed the subject by asking some questions about the new settlements, and the position of troops, those lately stationed at Roundtop under Colonel Forsythe.

At last dinner was announced and Monte Joe went into the dining-room with his lovely hostess, more bewildered than ever before as to what to think about her.

CHAPTER XLII.

A WOMAN OF MYSTERY.

TIGER TOM's widow was becoming more and more a mystery to Monte Joe.

She had welcomed him most cordially, and had talked in an unrestrained, truthful, sincere manner, and yet all the while he had seemed to feel that the woman was playing a part.

When they went in to dinner together he was amazed.

The snowy cloth and napkins, solid silver service, rare china, all in this frontier home of a desperado.

Then the manner in which the negress served the dinner showed that she knew her duties well.

There was some excellent soup, fish from the stream near by, and a roast of venison, with vegetables and a bottle of fine old Mexican wine.

Monte Joe enjoyed his dinner immensely, drank the health of his fair hostess, and yet all the while seemed to feel that in spite of the smile upon her lips, her laughing eyes and cheery manner, there were tears in her heart!

"Whatever he was, whatever she is, she certainly loved to idolatry that desperado husband of hers," mused Monte Joe.

With a small cup of coffee after dinner, and a fragrant cigar offered by his hostess, the gambler expressed himself as having set down to no table where he had been better entertained in many a long day.

While he whiffed away at his cigar upon the piazza, Valerie got her guitar and sung for him, and her voice was full of melody and pathos.

"I wish I could recall the name of a ballad I heard your husband sing one night, in the tavern at Trail Crossing.

"He had a superb voice, and he had gone to his room, next to mine, and partitions are thin in public hotels, you know, Mrs. Tracey, so when he sung the song I heard it all and it made a deep impression upon me on account of its plaintive air and sympathetic words."

She ran her fingers deftly across the strings and asked:

"Was this the song?"

Then she sung:

Thou art lost to me forever,
Eurylee,
For the seas of fate dis sever,
Eurylee!
But thy memory, o'er me stealing,
Harps upon the strings of feeling,
Joy's elusive isles revealing,
Eurylee!

She ceased, then bowed her head an instant and said in a low tone, as though thinking aloud:

"That is the song that won my heart, Monte Joe, for I heard Thomas Tracey sing it ere I had ever known him.

"Pardon me if I do not sing it all, for its words, its music, its memories choke me—now."

He changed the subject and soon after arose to go.

She again urged him to remain longer, but he said that he must be on his way, and so Veazey was called by her whistle, and his horse ordered.

She offered her hand cordially at parting, and then said in her impulsive way:

"If you will wait a few moments I will ride a short distance with you, if you wish."

"With pleasure," he answered, and as she went into her room to put on her habit, Monte Joe slipped a gold piece into the hand of the negress, as a souvenir of his visit, he said, while he asked:

"Do you not get very lonely here, auntie, never seeing any one?"

"No, sah, for Missy Valerie is comp'ny 'nough fer anybody, and dere is three cow-gemmans on de place, and now and den, a long time atween, other gemmans like you is, comes along fer dinner, though dey don't stay all night, as dey is afeerd o' ghosts, fer dis place is ha'nted, sah; deed it is."

"Do you ever see spirits, auntie?"

"Yas, sah, I has bofe seen 'em an' hear 'em; but den I keeps dark arter sunset.

"But Lor' bress you, sah, fer a gemman as knows how ter be one," and the negress made an old-time courtesy and departed, while the gambler went to interview Veazey, who just then came around with Valerie's horse, having hitched his animal to the rack.

Veazey looked every inch a tenderfoot in Texas, for he was a young man, with long stringy hair, fishy eyes, and seemed not overburdened with brains.

But though he took the gold-piece given him by Monte Joe with a grin and thanks, he did not seem to know the answer to a single question put to him by the gambler.

Just then Valerie appeared, attired in a riding-habit of black velvet, embroidered in gold and silver thread, and adorned with buttons.

She wore gauntlet gloves and a black sombrero with a heavy sable plume, while the edge of the hat brim was fringed with gold dollars, as is common in Mexico, and there was a gold cord encircling the crown.

If Monte Joe had thought her charming in her buckskin habit he now regarded her as more so, and raised her to the saddle, which was solidly mounted with silver, and had an embroidered housing, while the bridle was woven and with massive bit and buckles.

She carried a lariat hung at the saddle-horn, a repeating rifle swung on the other side at the cante, and about her waist was a sash with her never discarded belt of arms.

Monte Joe noticed at a glance that the woman was a perfect rider, and placing himself by her side led the way down the trail toward the prairie, more and more wondering at this woman of mystery.

CHAPTER XLIII.

A TEMPTATION RESISTED.

"I WISH to ride by my cowboys yonder, Monte Joe, and speak to them a moment, with your kind permission," said Valerie sweetly, as they rode out upon the prairie, and she nodded toward two mounted men seen some distance off and herding the cattle.

"Certainly," said Monte Joe, and then came the thought to him.

"If treachery is intended, now will be the time for them to show their hands.

"I'll be on my guard."

They rode toward the two cowboys, leaving the direct trail, and Monte Joe made himself as entertaining as possible, to destroy any idea that he had any suspicion of danger or treachery.

The gambler however took in the two men as they approached them.

One he had seen before, the other he did not know.

Yet he could not place when and where he had seen the man.

"Morgan, this gentleman tells me that some of the lower ranches have been raided by Mexican outlaws, and also that the Comanches are growing very uneasy, so it will be well not to let the cattle or ponies range too far.

"Keep always in sight of a signal from the ranch to recall you, and do not let the stock scatter, so as you could not round them up quickly, if there was need for it."

"Yes, ma'am," said the man who had been addressed as Morgan, and whom Monte Joe was sure that he had seen before, though the man showed no recognition of him.

"Have we not met before, pard?" he asked, quietly.

"I don't remember ter have seen yer, sir."

"About Trail Crossing?"

"No, sir; I came from New Mexico here," was the answer.

"Then I am mistaken," and with the remark from Valerie that she was going but a couple of miles on the trail, and would soon return, they rode on.

But Monte Joe had his eyes wide open, without appearing to be suspicious or watchful, and he distinctly saw Valerie drop a slip of paper as she turned away, and caught a peculiar look she gave the cowboy, Morgan.

He at once spoke of the pretty view, and turning quickly said:

"Now see how fine your ranch looks from here, Mrs. Tracey."

He had his eyes apparently upon the ranch, but they had caught sight of the two cowboys reading the slip of paper.

Valerie saw them also, and her face flushed, but she appeared relieved when she discovered how perfectly unsuspecting Monte Joe looked, and that he had not seen the act of the men.

For some three miles she held on with him, they having gone back into the trail, and she talked pleasantly and well as they went along.

At last she drew rein and extending her hand, said:

"I must leave you here, Monte Joe, as I do not care to go too far from my ranch."

"I assure you that I have enjoyed your visit immensely, and if ever you pass anywhere near again be sure that you will be welcome at my ranch."

"It has been a treat to talk to some one different from those I meet every day."

"And I have to thank you, Mrs. Tracey, for a most delightful hospitality, and I trust we shall meet again."

"Good-by," and she extended her hand again.

The gambler pressed the little gloved hand warmly, raised his sombrero and turned his horse as she did hers.

"What a temptation to make her a prisoner," he said in a low tone as he rode on.

"I am glad I resisted it, though I was surely tempted, for somehow with all my confidence in her one minute I doubt her the next."

"And yet, upon what grounds could I have taken her?"

"She has broken no law that I can see, she has simply been unfortunate in loving a villain, and if she knew his secret alliances with outlaws, as wife she could not be expected to betray him."

"No, I am glad I resisted the temptation, and did not betray the hospitality I received."

"By the way, it would be no easy matter to capture that woman either, I'm thinking, for she would fight like a tigress."

"But she dropped a note for those cowboys, and I caught them reading it."

"Now to watch for them," and Monte Joe rode on his way in deepest meditation.

CHAPTER XLIV.

A SUSPICION VERIFIED.

MONTA JOE had at first received the words of the strange woman, that she would accompany him on his way a short distance, with suspicion.

He dreaded being led into an ambush, with Valerie as the beautiful decoy.

Then he felt ashamed of himself for the thought, and next it flashed upon him if he could capture her it might be a good thing to bring

the Tigers of Texas to terms, if she was leagued with them, as he believed, or had believed, and did one moment, to change his mind the next.

"If I could only get a glimpse at her left hand, to see if it too has pricked into it the brand of the Star and Tiger," he mused to himself.

But that same left palm was as carefully concealed as possible, though not seemingly so.

When she was playing the guitar Monte Joe tried to get a look at the left palm, yet she held, accidentally it seemed, her hand in such a way as to thwart him.

When she had ridden away with him from the ranch he felt a trifle nervous as to how far she would go, and if the Lasso King, whose glass from the ridge was watching him he knew, might not misunderstand her coming, and, riding ahead join them somewhere.

"Buck is always so discreet I hope he will be in this case; but then I could not blame him if he did show up, naturally supposing I was bringing the woman to camp for a talk, after getting out of sight of the ranch."

But the woman turned back, greatly to Monte Joe's relief, and then he held on, wishing to stick to the trail as long as there was a chance of his being seen from the ranch with a glass, and he knew that he would be under observation for a long way off, if he was to be watched.

When he saw the paper dropped and the cowboys reading it, he became a trifle curious to know just what it meant.

"It could mean but one thing, dropped as it was, and that would be to follow me well away from the ranch."

"Well, I will hold on into the hill country and there make a halt, for Buck and the others will not leave the camp until my return, and it will be only about three miles to cut across the way the trail winds around now."

"But as to a follower, should one come?"

"Well, I think it but right that I should know his business, and I will."

A ride of a couple of miles further and the trail wound abruptly around a spur of a hill jutting out from the range in which was the Lasso King's camp.

A swiftly flowing stream with gravel bed, and willow-fringed banks wound down the valley beyond the spur, and here the gambler halted a moment, as though in thought.

As though having made up his mind as to his course he rode on to the ford of the stream, turned up it and kept on to a bend a few hundred feet above, where the willows grew thickly along the banks.

Riding under one of the largest of the overhanging branches, he tied his horse there firmly, leaving him knee deep in the water.

Then standing up in his saddle he got upon the limb and made his way to the bank down the tree.

Walking back to the spur around which the trail so abruptly turned, he crawled up the steep side to the top and peered over.

"Ah! it is as I thought," and he leveled his glass, which he carried swung behind his belt.

"It is Morgan, and he is upon my trail."

"Now to rope him in."

He slid back down the hill, and stepping up to the stump of an old tree made one end of his lariat fast around it.

The other end he held coiled in his hand, and climbing up the spur took position some ten feet high, just over the trail.

A revolver then was placed upon the rock by his side.

He had not waited long before he heard the hoof-falls of the coming horse and rider.

He was riding slowly, and evidently not suspecting such a possibility as the hunter being hunted.

A moment more and he came around the spur, and with wonderful dexterity Monte Joe cast the noose over the neck of the horse, while at the same instant he seized his revolver from the ground and covered the rider, calling out:

"Hands up, Pard Morgan!"

The horse had bounded to the end of the lariat to be brought up with a jerk that forced him to his knees, and his rider had found himself covered before he could draw a weapon.

Slipping down the hill, still keeping his man covered, Monte Joe said sternly:

"Well, sir, why are you tracking me?"

"I wasn't a-trackin' you, Monte Joe, I was a-lookin' for some stray cattle."

"Cattle do not stray along a trail, Morgan."

"And how is it that you know me now, when you did not awhile since?" and Monte Joe slipped the revolvers out of the man's belt, and unfastening the lasso from about the tree, wound it about his prisoner.

"The Lady Ch—I mean ther lady told me who you was."

"It is not so, for she did not speak my name while I was with you, and she went back the trail direct to the ranch."

"But you go with me."

"Where?"

"I'll show you in good time, Morgan; but now obey me, or I will kill you, and as you know me you should understand that I am not the man to make idle threats."

"I suspected you would come on my trail, and my suspicion is verified."

"Now hand me the note Mrs. Tracey dropped for you to read."

"My pard has it."

"I know who has it, so give it up."

"Come, no trifling!"

Morgan muttered an oath, but he took the slip of paper from his pocket and handed it to the gambler.

CHAPTER XLV.

MONTE JOE'S PRISONER.

THE gambler thrust the note into his pocket and then, with a light leap mounted behind the man he had made a prisoner.

Down to the stream he rode, and entering it bade Morgan turn the horse up-stream.

They soon came to where the horse of Monte Joe was hitched, and guiding the animal of the cowboy under another overhanging limb he made him fast.

Then he drew himself up into the tree and ordered his prisoner to do the same.

"You is a keen one," said the prisoner.

"Why?"

"Well, you is playing some deep game."

"Yes, and you are my trump card."

"Come, get up into the tree and follow me to the bank."

"I might fall."

"You'll be sure to do so if you do not obey me," and the revolver was leveled.

"Don't shoot! I'm a-comin'!" cried Morgan, and he "came" with alacrity.

When they were upon the ground together, the gambler said:

"Hold out your hands!"

"What for?"

Quick as a flash first one hand and then the other was seized, and with a strength that surprised the prisoner, Monte Joe had mastered and ironed his hands together.

Then he took the paper from his pocket and glanced at it.

It was written in a bold and very distinct hand.

"What he read was as follows:

"NUMBER FIVE:—

"Take the trail of Monte Joe and follow it, after you see me leave him.

"Discover where he camps and if he is alone, or has others with him.

"If he camps alone, remain near and see him depart in the morning.

"Then follow his trail back and see from whence he came when he visited the ranch—I mean by way of which trail.

T. T."

"Who wrote this?" and Monte Joe smiled as he read it.

"I doesn't know."

"Very well, I do; so now come with me."

"Where?"

"You'll find out—come!"

The gambler led the way on foot up the valley and then along the ridge.

It was nearing sunset, and he walked at a rapid pace, but the prisoner lagged back.

"You must walk faster."

"I can't do it; I'm lame."

"Well, go in front, and I'll walk behind; and more: I shall strike the same pace, and if you do not keep out of reach, look out, for you will feel my knife point."

As he spoke, the gambler drew his knife and stepped behind the man, who at once stepped off in a very brisk manner.

"I wish to reach my destination before dark, and the pace you now have will get us there," he said, complacently.

"Why didn't you ride?"

"Because I wish to leave the horses just where they are, and then, should any one follow from Tiger Tom's ranch to-morrow, you see they will discover the trail of your horse and mine entering the stream and coming out on the other side going on toward Trail Crossing."

"They will follow the trails to Trail Crossing, and what will have become of you no one will be able to tell, but I will be there."

Morgan turned pale at this and asked:

"Do you intend to murder me?"

"Oh no, for I am not one to murder any man."

"I can kill in self-defense, and I can hand a villain over to those who will act as judge, jury and executioners where his case demands it."

"But let me tell you that your life and safety are in your own hands."

"How?"

"Well, I have some friends in camp, where we are now going."

"They are the friends you were told to find out if I had near, and when you meet them certain questions will be asked you, certain terms will be offered to you, if you will do certain things."

"What is I to do?"

"You'll find out when you meet my friends."

"Who are they?"

"Have you ever heard of Captain Ned Hassan, the ranchero?"

"I has."

"He will be one, and then he has some of his cowboys with him."

"I guess that means I need not expect any mercy."

"I told you that it depended upon you, Morgan."

"I don't understand how, when I'm a prisoner."

"Well, there is another friend of mine there whom I did not mention."

"Does I know him?"

"I rather think that you do."

"What's his name?"

"Well, he answers to an ame he is not ashamed of, and he has other names given to him here in Texas, and I think he has won the right to them."

"What did yer say his name were?"

"Buck Taylor."

"Oh!"

The man's face turned pale with the ejaculation.

"You know him?"

"Yes, he's the Lasso King that killed Tiger Tom."

"Yes, and the Saddle King he is also called."

"But yonder high point overhangs our camp, so we will soon be there."

"You don't seem to mind letting me know where it is."

"No, for you are in very safe hands," was the somewhat ominous response of Monte Joe.

CHAPTER XLVI.

NUMBER FIVE.

THE Lasso King and Captain Hassan watched the going of Monte Joe to the old Mission Ranch, with the greatest interest and considerable anxiety.

They feared that he might have undertaken more than he could accomplish.

But after he had been seen to ride up to the cabin and dismount, as he did not reappear or signal, the cowboys were allowed to stake their horses out near and not remain mounted, but be ready to answer a call quickly.

Upon the ridge, with their field-glasses leveled at the ranch, watching every move, Buck Taylor and Captain Hassan kept their post, wondering at the long stay of the gambler.

Thus time passed on until three hours and more had gone by, and Buck Taylor began to grow uneasy, and a dangerous light to gleam in his eyes.

"If they have harmed Monte Joe, I will bring such a retribution upon them that they will wish they had never been born," he said, in a tone that showed he meant all that he said.

"There is Monte Joe now, Buck, riding away from the ranch," said the captain, who had just put his glass again to his eye.

"Yes, captain, and he is not alone—it is a woman with him."

"The wife of Tiger Tom."

"Yes, I judge so."

"What does it mean?"

"I cannot guess."

"They are leaving the ranch together."

"Yes."

They watched them closely, saw them ride out upon the prairie, then, instead of coming toward the ridge, go around the hill and take the trail southward.

The two watchers looked at each other in surprise.

What the strange way went meant they could not tell.

"Well, I think I shall follow along the ridge here, captain, and see which way they go," said the cowboy chief.

This the two did, for Captain Hassan went with the Lasso King.

They reached a place at last that gave them an extensive sweep with their glasses, and far away off over the prairie they saw Monte Joe, the woman and two horsemen.

Then the gambler and the woman left the other two and took a trail which would bring them to the range further along.

To the surprise of the Lasso King and Captain Hassan the woman then turned back alone, while Monte Joe held on.

"I cannot understand that move," said the ranchero.

"Well, sir, Monte Joe will come here now, for he goes the way he does to throw them off the scent that he has a camp and comrades here."

"I believe you are right, Buck, so we may as well return to camp."

This they did, and it was two hours later when Monte Joe and his prisoner entered the canyon.

It was just twilight, but Buck Taylor called out when he saw him:

"Hello, Joe, where have you been?"

"Reconnoitering."

"Foraging too, it seems, for what have you there?"

"A gentleman whom we wish to hear talk, for he belongs at old Mission Ranch."

"Ah! you left there with a lady, and now appear with a man."

"Yes, the lady was simply escorting me well off her lands."

"But this is one of her cowboys, and he took my trail, which I suspecting, laid in ambush for him and here he is."

"One of the men from the ranch of Tiger Tom, eh?"

"Well, let us see if he wears the brand," and

Buck Taylor quickly grasped the prisoner's left hand, turned it over and revealed the palm.

"There's the Star and Tiger brand, Buck," said Monte Joe.

"Yes, there is no mistake in your man," and Buck Taylor gave the prisoner a searching look under which he quailed, for the discovery of the brand in his hand caused him to turn livid.

As though to explain it he said:

"That brand in my hand don't mean nothing, for it was done in camp one day for fun."

"Well, it has hardly proven a cause for fun for others, and I doubt if it will be for you, my man," said Captain Hassan.

"What is your name, my man?" asked Buck Taylor.

"Morgan."

"In this note he is called *Number Five*," and then Monte Joe went on to explain how he had seen the note dropped by the wife of Tiger Tom, and had found it on the prisoner.

"Number Five, did you say, Monte Joe?"

"Yes, Captain Hassan."

"Well, he is very appropriately named, or rather numbered, for you remember, One, Two and Three were the ones who captured my daughter, and they were hanged, for they had the same brand in their left hands of the Star and the Tiger?"

"That is so, Captain Hassan," said Monte Joe.

"And Number Four," said Buck, "was the man who laid in wait for me, but got caught himself."

"Yes, and he had the same brand."

"And this one, wearing the same mark, is known as Number Five, you say, and he is Number Five on our list."

"But what do you intend to do with him, Monte Joe?"

"Give him the same chance we did the others, and if he refuses, then he must suffer the fate of his comrades," was the stern response of the gambler, and then he led the prisoner away to another part of the camp so that he would not see his comrade Pickett also in durance vile.

CHAPTER XLVII.

MONTE JOE'S REPORT.

WHEN his prisoner was placed by himself in camp, and so that neither he or the other one would know of the presence of each other, Monte Joe went back to the camp-fire, where one of the cowboys was cooking supper, and soon they sat down to the enjoyment of a very tempting meal.

The prisoners were not forgotten either, and then the three friends settled themselves for a talk, for Monte Joe said that he wished to make his report, after which he had a suggestion to propose.

"Well, Monte Joe, what did you discover at the ranch?" asked Captain Hassan.

"The wife of Tiger Tom, and as beautiful a woman as I ever saw, a negress and a young fellow who looked like a tenderfoot, but whom I do not believe to be such a fool as he appeared."

"Those were all I saw there, except half a dozen villainous-looking dogs, and two men out on the prairie, herding cattle and ponies, and one of whom I have here in camp as a prisoner."

"If there were others, or any evidence of others, I failed to find the slightest indication of the fact."

"The wife of Tiger Tom received me most kindly, and I enjoyed a long talk with her, while the dinner the negress served was worthy of any home."

"The silver service was solid and massive, the china of the finest, and the dinner excellent, with wine to wash it down, and a most fragrant cup of coffee and a good cigar afterward."

"She sung for me, and she has a superb voice, and I tried my best to get a look at the palm of her left hand, but she thwarted me easily, and if she wears the brand of the Star and Tiger I was unable to find it out."

"She told me that she had married her husband on account of her deep love for him, which his perfect manhood had won."

"She spoke of him in the highest terms, and told me that she lived there as she did, because she would not leave her husband's grave."

"Then I hinted that there was a rumor that her husband had been seen in Trail City, and she told me frankly that it was his specter, for she too had seen the ghost one evening, and as it came toward her she had fainted."

"She asked me to remain longer, and then when I said I must be going, told me to wait until she put on her riding-habit and she would go with me."

"She called the young man I spoke of with two sharp whistles, and while she was getting ready I gave a liberal fee to both the negress and the young fellow, and tried to pump them, but in vain."

"But I discovered that there were no others there, than the two cowboys then out with the herd, and themselves, or they both simply lied to me."

"That the woman wrote the note to Number Five, when she was getting ready for her ride, and dropped it upon the prairie, there is no doubt; but I was watching her closely and saw

her do it, and more, beheld the two men reading it as she rode on.

"Now the woman suggested going by to speak to the men, and suspicious of her from the start, I was on the *qui vive* for every look and action.

"Here is the letter to Number Five, and you see how it is signed?"

"Yes, it is signed T. T.," said Buck Taylor quickly.

"And she calls the man by a number rather than by name."

"She called him Morgan, Captain Hassan, but she wrote to him as Number Five, and this would indicate a band, known by numbers."

"I should think so."

"She signs it T. T. and her name is Valerie, so that looks strange that she should put her husband's initials."

"True, very strange."

"But another thing I observe which seems to have escaped you both."

"Well?" said Captain Hassan, while Buck called out:

"Out with it, Monte Joe."

"Don't you both think that Tiger Tom wrote a very peculiar hand?"

"Yes, remarkably so."

"And do you not recognize in this note the same writing?"

Both eagerly scanned the note to Number Five and Captain Hassan said:

"As I remember Tiger Tom's writing this would be mistaken for it."

"Yes, it is exactly like his writing," Buck Taylor remarked.

"Well, I thought so, and yet I could almost swear, should be willing to at any rate, that Tiger Tom is dead."

"That woman does not mourn over an empty grave, and she shows that she constantly mourns in her face."

"Then too, her saying that she saw his ghost; but altogether it is a most mysterious case, and she sends a man after me, as her letter reveals."

"Or some one may have been hidden in the cabin and written that letter to Number Five."

"True, and the numbering of these men shows that a League exists."

"Now, who are they, what are they, and is that woman the chief of the band?"

Neither Buck Taylor nor Captain Hassan was prepared to answer this, and the latter said:

"Well, we can try this new man and see if fear of death will force him to reveal anything he knows."

"Yes, he must be put to the test as Tony Pickett was, and perhaps he may be forced to tell what he knows!"

"Perhaps, and we must try him at once, for I left his horse and mine hitched in the stream, my idea being to take them back to the ford and out of the stream toward Trail Crossing."

"Then should other trailers be sent, only the two trails will be found going on, and if I am followed to Trail Crossing, they will find me, but nothing of their man, whom you must hold, Captain Hassan, with the other prisoner, after he has been put to the test of his loyalty to the League of the Star and Tiger."

CHAPTER XLVIII.

DIVIDING FORCES.

MORGAN, the prisoner, was taken to a camp-fire apart, by Monte Joe, Buck Taylor and Captain Hassan, and every appeal was made to him to betray his comrades of the League of the Star and Tiger.

But in vain, for he asserted his utter innocence of belonging to such a band, and vowed that he knew nothing of their existence.

Then threats were tried upon him, and the cowboys came with their ropes and the same scene was gone through with that Pickett had undergone, only Morgan proved abusive and savage, resisted fiercely and swore fiercely at his captors.

As it was evident that the man would die with the secret untold, Monte Joe gave the order not to string him up, which, by the way, he had no intention of doing, without better reason to know that the man was guilty of individual crimes, and the two prisoners were then allowed to face each other.

All noted the start of each at beholding the other a prisoner, and strange glances passed between them, though to an ordinary observer no sign of recognition, or that they had ever seen each other before was shown.

"Well, I must say that the band is well organized and captained, to have the power over its members that we have seen exists," Captain Hassan said.

"Yes, the head of the band is a man of will, nerve and ability, whoever he may be," Buck Taylor remarked.

"Tiger Tom was, of that there is no doubt, and the question now is, has his wife not stepped into his place, or is it this strange counterpart, this ghost of the giant *Ranchero Desperado*?"

"That we are upon the trail to find out, Monte Joe, but thus far we do not seem to be making much headway," and Buck Taylor seemed disap-

pointed, though he was by no means discouraged.

"Now I have a plan to propose, since that man was not to be begged, bribed or frightened into a confession."

"Out with it, Monte Joe," Captain Hassan said.

"When I captured the man, I was careful to leave no traces to betray a struggle."

"I mounted behind him and rode down to a stream which was to be forded, and turned into it, as I had gone upon my own horse."

"I left the former standing in the stream, tied to the branch of a tree overhanging the water, and I came ashore down the tree."

"Good for you, Monte Joe."

"You are getting well up in a frontier education," laughed Buck Taylor.

"So I took my man the same way, and he landed as I did, only I had to draw on him to make him do so."

"Both horses are still hitched there, standing in the water, so my idea is for me to press on with them to-night for some distance, which leaves the trail, if followed from the old Mission Ranch, as though I had been tracked by the man sent after me."

"The saddle and bridle I can hide, thus taking the horse on into Trail Crossing with me."

"Being on the spot, at Trail Crossing, I believe I can aid you more than by remaining with you here, Buck, and you can go to Round-top Post, where your men must now be, and bring them to some camp in this neighborhood, where you can remain in hiding and watch operations about Tiger Tom's ranch."

"But wherever you camp, leave a note hidden here, in some place we agree upon, where I am to find you, or a courier sent by me, or Captain Hassan, who can return home with his men, for they may be needed there."

"Now what do you think of my plan?"

"It is just what we should do all round," Buck Taylor said earnestly, while Captain Hassan remarked:

"Yes, for you can act more to your own satisfaction, Buck, with your own men, and I will not be so far away at my ranch, to help you with mine, if you need aid."

"Then too my Cowboy Rangers, where they are, will be a check in a manner upon raiders."

"I will keep them, as it were, upon scouting duty, to discover all the information I can for you, and have couriers ready to dispatch to you at once, or to Trail Crossing to Monte Joe, who can send word to me, if he wishes to reach you more quickly than one man could make it from the settlement, for I will keep a couple of my best mounted men over on the trail to meet any one he may send."

Thus it was arranged, and Monte Joe decided to start at once, and Buck Taylor said he would accompany him on foot, for to ride would but leave a trail, as far as where he was to find the horses.

So the two set out together and after an hour's rapid walk came to the stream, where the horses were awaiting most anxiously a release from their unpleasant position.

As the saddle and bridle of the prisoner Morgan were in fine condition, Buck Taylor said he would shoulder them back to camp, as the man could then ride one of the two pack-horses which Captain Hassan had brought along, as he always traveled with as much as possible in the way of wraps and provisions to make them comfortable when camping out.

So the horses were taken down to the ford, the saddle and bridle tossed to Buck Taylor upon the bank, and the two friends parted.

The cowboy chief returned on foot to the camp in the canyon, and Monte Joe went on his way to Trail Crossing.

The Lasso King reached camp soon after midnight, and found Captain Hassan sitting up awaiting him.

As it would be well to get away from the locality under cover of the night, for fear that some one from the Mission Ranch might be prowling around, the camp was aroused before dawn and Captain Hassan and his men, with the two prisoners, started for home, while Buck Taylor rode away alone on the trail to the new military post of Round-top.

CHAPTER XLIX.

THE RETURN.

CAPTAIN HASSAN and his men returned to Soldier's Retreat Ranch to find Mrs. Hassan and Belle becoming very anxious regarding him.

A party of unknown horsemen had appeared in sight of some of the scouting cowboys of the ranch, and had appeared as though at a loss to know the way, for they rode about in a manner that showed they were either lost or pretending to be.

But the cowboys did not like their appearance and were not to be entrapped into going too near them, as there were some twenty men in the party.

A courier was sent in haste to summon Rio Grande Rob and the force from the ranch, and seeing him depart, the band of mounted strangers seemed to divine his intention, and retreated toward the Rio Grande, having come from that direction.

When Rio Grande Rob and his men arrived, the captain of the cowboys at once sent one man on the trail which the strangers had come, and he, with his men, followed on the way they had gone.

A ride of several hours brought the single trailer in sight of his comrades, the trail having wound around and joined the one leading toward the river, which way they had come.

But a short distance further on, the trail suddenly branched off and headed toward Trail Crossing.

Fearing a flank movement of the party upon the ranch, Rio Grande Rob had returned rapidly, leaving two men to follow the trail on, and report where the horsemen went, if they had not gone toward Soldier's Retreat.

These men returned to the ranch to report that the trail broke up into a dozen, but all moved in the direction of Trail Crossing.

After this alarm, however, Rio Grande Rob and his men were more on the alert, and the return of Captain Hassan and his six cowboys was a great relief.

The prisoners were at once placed in the guard-house—the "jug"—at the cowboy's camp, Captain Hassan especially commanding, however, that they were not to make their "escape" as the other three had done—that is, from the jug to the grave.

"You had best put a man on watch to see if he can learn anything from their conversation, for the men are friends, I am sure, and certainly belong to the same band," the captain had said to Rio Grande Rob, and this was done.

To his wife and daughter Captain Hassan gave a detailed account of all that had happened since leaving for Trail Crossing, for the stay at the ranch had been a short one when he and Monte Joe had returned together.

"The more I know of that man Monte Joe the more of a wonder he becomes to me, and I am almost convinced that he is not what he seems, but is playing some deep game for a purpose which he only knows," said Captain Hassan, as he sat with Belle and her mother in their pleasant library the evening of the return home of the ranchero.

"He is a mystery to me, Ned, for he is an accomplished gentleman, and yet will only allow himself to be known by that horrid name of Monte Joe, which I feel sure he has not taken to hide from justice under, as so many men do," Mrs. Hassan said.

"No, he is no criminal, no man dodging the law, I feel sure, papa; but he does wish to remain unknown, that is certain, even to us, for one would think he would have made a confidant of you at least, as you have been together so much."

"No, Belle, he does not even hint of his past; but he is as brave as a lion, and he is a thorough plainsman, for that much both Buck and I discovered on this last trip."

"He knows the country too, perfectly, though he does not profess to do so, and matched against that strange and daring woman, Tiger Tom's wife, he did not come out second best by any means, for he captured the man she sent to track him, and he became convinced at last that I was right in maintaining that Tiger Tom was dead."

"But who is this double then, papa?"

"That I do not know; but both Monte Joe and Buck Taylor are on the trail to find out, and if they do not do so, no other man in Texas need try."

"As for myself, I shall keep the ranch as a military camp until I know what is done about these raiders, which are to come from Mexico, but who I believe have their retreat somewhere about the home of Tiger Tom."

"Do you suspect the woman, Ned, of being connected with them?"

"I know not, Marion, what to suspect; but she may develop into the Tigress of Texas, as her husband was the Tiger."

"Yet you said she was young, beautiful, accomplished and very fascinating."

"Yes, Belle, she is all that, and more," Monte Joe said; "but then it is just those lovable women that are the most dangerous, and in spite of her innocent ways to Monte Joe, she certainly carried that man on the prairie a note to follow him, he was known as Number Five, which proves the existence of a secret band, and the order to him was signed T. T. which, as Tiger Tom is dead, may mean the Texas Tigress."

"At least such is my reasoning; but it was a desperately bold deed for Monte Joe to go to that ranch alone, and he and Buck Taylor will yet bring the Star and Tiger League to bay, mark my words, for this is my prediction, my prophecy."

CHAPTER L.

A RUDE AWAKING.

BUCK TAYLOR was half a dozen miles away from the camp in the canyon when the sun arose.

He had taken no trail, going across country according to his own reckoning.

When at last he struck the trail to the new fort, he went into camp for breakfast and rest for himself and horse.

He found a secluded spot off the trail, and

after breakfast indulged in an hour's nap, which he needed greatly.

He was just thinking how pleasant a sleep of another hour would be as he was half-waking, half-sleeping, when he was aroused to the widest kind of wakefulness by the words:

"We has our guns on yer, pard, so don't raise a row and git kilt!"

There before him, yet sheltered behind a rock, except their heads and shoulders, Buck Taylor the Lasso King beheld two men covering him with their rifles as he lay upon his blankets.

He had been in too many scenes of danger to wilt at what he beheld.

He had been in too many situations of a like kind to throw his life away by a single movement, as though to open hostilities.

So he said calmly:

"Well, pards, you have got the drop upon me and no mistake.

"I was very tired, so sought some sleep, and you woke me up with a nightmare."

"It'll be a worse nightmare for you, Buck Taylor, when we gits you whar we is goin' ter take yer."

"Where is that?"

"Waal, we may sell yer ter yer own men, who has gone ter ther new army post of Roundtop, if they pays enough."

"And if not to them?"

"We knows one who will be glad ter git yer, I guesses."

"Pards, I beg you not to take me to the cowboys, for they will pay big money to get me, after my desertion of them."

"Your desertion of 'em?" asked one of the men, in surprise.

"Yes."

"What does yer mean, Buck Taylor?"

"I mean just what I say, that the Cowboy Rangers, known as the Lasso Kings, will be glad to get me to torture me to death, while I'll be hanged if the soldiers get possession of me."

"Hain't yer connected with the army now?"

"Tell me who you are, and I'll answer."

"Waal, we don't belong to no army, 'ceptin' our own."

"Then you have not heard that I deserted?"

"You deserted!"

"Yes, I deserted my command ten days ago, for you must have heard of my killing Captain Crane at the fort."

"No, we didn't."

"Well, I lighted out, and I sought those who I knew would befriend me, though I had been a foe to the band."

"Who does yer mean?" said one of the two men, still kneeling behind the rock, not ten feet from Buck Taylor, and with their rifles covering him, as he now sat up on his blankets, his belt of arms lying just within reach of his hand.

"Come, pards, hands up and see if we are not comrades of the Star and Tiger League," said Buck Taylor, and as he spoke he raised his hands, the palms turned toward the two men.

Instantly the two appeared excited, and talked together in a whisper, when one said:

"Does yer mean that yer is one of us, Buck Taylor?"

"Does not Tiger Tom's brand prove it?"

"Waal, it does, but we kin hardly believe it!"

"You see it was hanging or desertion, and I knew the Tigers would receive me."

"Now hands up and let me see if I am talking to comrades!"

"You knows us, that's sart'in," and the speaker raised his left hand, revealing the Star and Tiger brand in the palm.

"I knew we were pards of the League, though it's all new to me, my friends, seeing that I have only been in it a very short while and have not met you all yet."

"I am now scouting to find out about a rich Government train that goes through to Roundtop, and there will be a number of the Tigers to follow, so we can strike them hard."

"You see I am posted, having held the position I did."

"Put it there, pards," and Buck Taylor arose, leaving his belt of arms and rifle lying by his blankets, and held forth his hand.

The men advanced as though satisfied that all was right, and the keen, ever-watchful eyes of the Lasso King saw that each was ready to extend his left hand, so he put forth his, with the remark:

"It's hard to remember about shaking with the left hand."

"You see all the signs of the Tigers are so new to me I have forgotten them, half."

That this man was playing a part the two men had not the remotest idea, for all seemed so genuine about his story of desertion and seeking refuge in the Tigers' League.

Then too there was the star in blue in his hand, the Tiger in red, and the lettering.

How could they doubt him?

They were as hard-faced specimens as a man would meet in a day's journey through Texas, and that is saying a good deal.

But they were well armed, would pass as cowboys in their dress, and were, without doubt, a desperate couple, reckless and criminal.

The hand-shaking over, Buck Taylor then suggested an early dinner, as he had a liberal stock

of provisions, a suggestion they received with great satisfaction.

Their horses were then brought up and staked out near the Lasso King's, one of the men went for water to a brook near, and the other for wood for the fire, while Buck Taylor got out the provisions.

"I'll pump them before I declare war," he muttered benignly as he went to work to get dinner.

CHAPTER LI.

A STRATEGIC MOVE.

THE Lasso King took great pains to have the best dinner his larder could afford.

Captain Hassan had supplied him well from his stores, and he had, in addition to some potatoes, onions and venison, some bacon, coffee and bread.

The two men seemed delighted at the prospect of a "full feed," while Buck Taylor, having had his breakfast just before his nap, was not hungry, and under the circumstances anyhow would not have had much of an appetite, anticipating the bold game he had to master two men or be mastered.

So, as he was host, he did his best to entertain, remarking quietly:

"I can give you both an appetizer, and after dinner we will have dessert."

The "appetizer" came in a flask which the Lasso King drew from his saddle-pocket.

He was not a drinking man himself, but the flask was full of excellent old whisky which Belle Hassan had insisted he should take along in case of "snake-bites."

"The whisky is good, pards, so don't be afraid to take a long pull, for I don't drink, you know," said the Lasso King, handing over the flask, into which he had put several morphine powders, for Captain Hassan had fixed him up a little buckskin case of medicines to carry with him.

The men drank the flask dry with a gusto that was refreshing to the cowboy chief to behold, as he was so deeply interested in their doing so.

"Now for dinner," he said, and he added:

"I am just sleepy enough to take a nap afterward, for I've been going considerable of nights lately."

"So has we, pard."

"How was it you found me here?"

"Why, we had orders from headquarters to scout around the new army post, and get at what was being done there."

"I see, and to note the number of soldiers, how many cavalry and all that; but I can give all the information needed, as I know, and you can get the credit of having found it out."

"We did find out considerable, Pard! Lasso King, and that your men were on the search for the new post."

"Yes, they are anxious to find me, you know."

"But do you go on from here to headquarters?"

"Yes."

"When will you get there, or do you scout on the way?" and Buck Taylor was making a venture to find out just how far away, "headquarters" was.

"We'll get there afore midnight, if we holds straight on, but if we camps, not until tomorrow, early in the morning."

"I see; but is not that venison good?"

"It's prime fust-class."

"Do you know that there is a move on foot for the whole band?"

"Waal, the boys was saying something about it."

"I reckon it will be a move on Hassan's ranch, for it's a rich place, you know, pards; but we'll have to take more men than I fear we can raise."

"If we takes the whole band, we goes fifty strong."

"True, but the cowboys on the Hassan Ranch number nearly fifty, and they are good fighters."

"They'll be no match for the Tigers, with the surprise we'll give them."

"No, but it is a pity Tiger Tom is not to lead them," and this bait Buck threw out boldly.

"Lordy! hain't he a-goin'?" asked one of the men in surprise that was unfeigned, the cowboy chief noted.

"Well, he isn't just well, I believe," he ventured.

"And hain't been since that close call you give him, Lasso King."

"I tell yer it were ther closest of his life."

"Yes."

And Buck Taylor was at a loss what else to say.

"How is you and him, pard, in friendship now?" asked the other man.

"Oh, I feel only the most friendly regard for him now."

"And he meets yer half-way?"

"He has dropped all reference to the past."

"That was squar' of him, I thinks; but I guesses he'd rather have yer on his side than be ag'in' him, as you was ther only man as got ther best of him, I guesses."

"I do not know about that; but what are your numbers?"

"Mine is Number Seven."

"And I'm Number Six; but how powerful

sleepy I feels, for I can hardly keep my eyes open."

"It is the whisky, eating a good dinner, and the sultry day."

"I'm in for a nap," and Buck Taylor threw himself down upon his blankets.

Number Six arose and went to where his saddle lay and was asleep in an instant, while Number Seven had dropped back from where he had been sitting while eating.

Then Buck Taylor buckled on his belt of arms, arose cautiously and placed the two rifles of the men over by his saddle.

His next move was to take a couple of pairs of handcuffs from his saddle-pocket and going up to Number Six he slipped them upon his wrists, the man making no move in his deep slumber.

Number Six was then completely disarmed, and then came the turn of Number Seven who was equally as fast asleep.

He, too, was manacled and disarmed, and Buck Taylor sat down to think over matters, for to go then with the two men he knew was impossible as they could not be aroused without considerable effort.

He had, however, had such a close call himself that he decided to remain awake and on watch, for he had no desire to be again caught in a trap.

CHAPTER LII.

A COMPLETE SURPRISE.

"I'm afraid I overdosed those fellows with morphine, and yet it could not be, as there was not enough of the drug really to hurt one man," said Buck Taylor, as the hours passed and his two prisoners still slumbered serenely.

Then, as he felt that he was in a dangerous locality, hampered as he was with two prisoners, and should be on his way, he decided to prepare for the start.

The three horses were saddled and bridled.

Then he rolled up his blankets and his cooking utensils and strapped them to his saddle, after which he took the two lariats of the men to bind them with.

As he found it hard to rouse Number Six, he raised him bodily in his strong arms and placing him in his saddle securely tied him there with his lariat.

Number Seven was then treated in a like manner, and taking the stake-ropes of the prisoners' horses the Lasso King mounted his own animal and set off on the trail.

He laughed at the ludicrous position of his prisoners, for they reeled from side to side in a marvelously drunken way, and seemed to possess no power to move or arouse themselves.

Their horses fretted under the unsteady riding of their riders and so the Lasso King brought them upon either side of him, and then began to arouse them as they rode along.

He call to them, shook them violently and only after considerable effort was enabled to get a sleepy stare from Number Six, while Number Seven appeared to arouse himself more quickly to the fact that something had gone wrong.

"What the matter pard?" he asked in a dazed sort of way.

"Oh, you drank too much and I am carrying you to the lock-up that's all."

"I—" but he stopped short for he saw that he was in irons and bound to his saddle.

Then in a roar came the words:

"What does this mean, Buck Taylor?"

The voice of alarm now aroused his comrade and he too took in the situation, that he was handcuffed and bound to his saddle.

"It means that I changed my mind, and am going to take you to Roundtop to make the acquaintance of the Lasso Kings."

Then such a torrent of oaths as flowed upon Buck Taylor would have dammed any ordinary brook.

The Lasso King laughed in his light-hearted way and said:

"Come, don't be so hot about it, for turn-about is fair play."

"You found me asleep and made me a prisoner, and I found you awake and you are my prisoners—see?"

"No! I see that you have betrayed us!"

"Yes, you lied to us."

"You should not believe all you hear out here on the prairies."

"We'll get even for this, Buck Taylor."

"A threatened man is long-lived, pards."

"But I saw it was all up with me, so I played a game of strategy."

"You bit at the bait I fished with, and I got out of a very bad scrape."

"I had to tell you a few romances it is true, but they do not lie very heavily upon my soul under the circumstances."

"You drank up some rare old whisky I had, in case of a snake-bite, and I doctored it with some morphine powders I had along."

"As you slept so sweetly, undisturbed by your consciousness, I had not the heart to disturb you, so planted you in your saddles, and now we are moving upon your enemies, the Lasso Kings."

"But you gave us the grip—"

"Silence!" roared his companion.

"Yes, I live to learn, and I'm a pretty good guesser, so I guessed at your signs all I could."

"One thing tell us?"

"Yes."

"How did you get that mark on your hand?"

"On the palm of my left hand?"

"Yes."

"The star and the tiger?" and Buck laughed.

"Yes."

"I'll tell you how I got that, and let me say that it is not an indelible brand like yours, for it will soon wear off."

"Who put it there?"

"I had some watch duty yesterday, and a friend who is something of an artist had wisely brought from his home some blue and red ink, and while we were on a ridge, watching the result of a mission a pard had gone on to Tiger Tom's ranch, this was pricked into my hand."

"It has served me well, has it not, for it saved my life."

"How so?"

"You would have seen that my life was cut short had I not worn the brand and been able to deceive you with it."

"We wouldn't have harmed you."

"Then why cover a man with your rifles as you did?"

The men muttered something in common, very much like oaths, and said no more then.

Buck Taylor had played his cards well, and had won.

He was a long way yet from Roundtop, and he felt anxious about getting there in safety with his two prisoners, though he had made up his mind that they should not escape him.

As it was nearing sunset, and men and horses were becoming fagged, they were ascending a ridge beyond which was the open prairie, crossed by a few streams all the way to Roundtop Post, and suddenly they beheld in their rear a band of horsemen.

"Comanches!" cried Buck Taylor.

"Come, spur on after me!"

CHAPTER LIII.

FORCED TO FIGHT.

THE Comanches discovered on the trail, by Buck Taylor, were yet a long way off.

But there were fully a score of them, and they were coming on hot in pursuit.

The quick glance of the Lasso King had taken in the top of the hill, where there were a few trees, and the ground was rugged.

Toward this he headed, for he saw that it commanded a wide sweep around it, and it had the appearance of having a hiding-place for their horses.

In this he was not mistaken, for there was a ravine near the top where the three horses could be hopped and placed, though crowded; but comfort for the animals was not to be looked to then when the lives of the riders were at stake.

To run for it, Buck Taylor saw meant capture, for the horses of the outlaws were well fagged out.

So to the hill he went, and he had the horses hopped and hidden there.

Then he placed the two men in position behind rocks, one on each side, and said:

"Now I know you would rather fall into the hands of the Comanches than mine; but I shall force you to fight, if they crowd us, and I'll tell you now, if I see you playing off on me, I'll put a bullet into you as sure as my name is Buck Taylor."

"I shall trust you with your weapons if I have to, but you see those rocks above you? Well, there is my position, and you shall be watched, for I neither intend that you or the Indians shall kill me."

"Now I'll change those irons you wear, from your wrists to your ankles."

He fastened the manacles around both ankles, locking the cuffs together, and then took his position among the rocks just above the two men.

From his point of observation he could watch both men and the Indians too, but to make it safer he hastily cut a few boughs from the trees and surrounded the tops of the rocks with them.

The Comanches were now near at hand, and came dashing straight at the position, for they had seen that they only had three men to deal with, and they could be counted as eight to one.

Buck Taylor bound the rifles of the two men to his prisoners, and their belt of arms too, while he said:

"Remember! the first sign of treachery is your death-knell, for I would rather fight them alone, only I feel that we three can stand them off if you do your duty."

"Will yer let us go if we does?"

"I will not, for you are not helping me, but a hindrance."

"But you know what I shall do if you fail me, for I am not going to lose you, or let those redskins get my scalp if I can help it."

"You are good shots, I know, so when you fire, and I will give you the word, I shall expect to see an Indian fall for each shot."

"If I see you are not going to do your duty I shall roll these big rocks down on you, killing two birds with one stone, and burying you besides."

"Now look out."

The men seemed to realize that the Lasso King was in deadly earnest.

But each man made up his mind that they

would fight well at first, and in the end turn upon Buck Taylor, when the Indians were beaten off.

"Now they are coming!"

"Number Six, take that man on the white horse."

"Number Seven, drop the one on the spotted pony."

"I will take the chief."

On came the Indians in a mass and at a full run.

"Fire!" shouted Buck Taylor, and as the three rifles flashed almost together the Lasso King gave utterance to his wild, terrible war-cry so well known and dreaded upon the border.

Down went the white horse, and his rider, if not wounded, got a terrible fall upon the hard ground, for he lay motionless.

The warrior upon the spotted pony threw his hands wildly about his head and fell from his saddle.

The chief got a bullet in the center of his forehead and never knew who killed him.

These fatalities, added to the war-cry of the Texan, told the Indians whom they had corraled, and drove them into a retreat that was as rapid as their charge; for they knew that the Lasso King was there and supposed the two men were a couple of his matchless riders and fighters.

They did not, however, get off yet, for the repeating rifle of the Lasso King rung out shot after shot, and there was another warrior and a couple of horses seen to go down under the shower of lead pumped into the flying mass.

Arrows and shots had fallen upon the hill-top too, but neither of the three men or their horses were hurt.

"So far, good!" grimly muttered Buck Taylor as he began to reload his rifle.

CHAPTER LIV.

THE COWBOY CHIEF'S STRATEGY.

BUCK TAYLOR took in the situation after the first charge coolly and critically.

He saw that the Comanches had by no means retreated out of range of his rifle, but this he did not let them know by throwing a shot in their midst.

They evidently knew nothing of the range of his rifle, and this he saw was greatly in his favor.

Another fact he noted was that their ponies were even much nearer, not staked out, but held, all of them in a line, by a single warrior.

They were kept ready for instant chase should the men at bay make a sudden dash down the ridge or a ride for life.

Then the Lasso King noted his position more carefully, and saw that though the hill was steep in his rear he could take the horses down it to the prairie.

His knowledge of Indian nature told him that the Comanches saw that it would take a long time to flank his position, as he was just at the pass through the top of the ridge, and they had no idea that he could escape without their discovering it, and more, that when night came they would make a rush upon the hill-top under cover of the darkness and on foot.

But Buck Taylor plotted against what he deemed was surely the Indian policy to entrap him, or capture them by a charge on foot, and was prepared against his being wrong in his surmise.

"Pass your rifle up here, butt first, Number Six, for me to reload," he said.

The man sullenly obeyed, and the order was given to Number Seven, who also did as ordered.

"Better give us our revolvers, too, for night work, as I guesses it will be close quarters," said Number Six.

"Yes, so I think; but I must congratulate you upon having done excellent work, both of you."

"Now take this piece of blanket, Number Six, and make four mufflers of it for the hoofs of your horse, and you do the same with this piece, Number Seven."

"What for?"

"Because I order you to do so."

"I doesn't know how."

"You can run a string around it, making it like a bag, to tie around the fetlocks, and here is some string for the purpose."

The men grumblingly set to work, and Buck Taylor soon had the four mufflers for the hoofs of his horse ready.

"Let me see yours."

Number Six handed one up, and what Buck Taylor said to him about it caused it to be very quickly improved upon.

"I do not intend to trifle with you, men."

"My life is at stake, and if you fail me in any way, I shall get rid of the man who makes the attempt."

"I mean what I say."

The mufflers were then made, and slipping down from his position into the ravine, Buck Taylor soon fastened them firmly upon the hoofs of the horses, though they could, with a knife, be quickly removed.

Then the Lasso King got back into his position, while Number Six said:

"It's gettin' dark, so give us our guns ag'in."

"No, I'll keep them," was the answer, and as he saw that the Comanches had no intention of

an attack until later, he slipped down to the side of first one and then the other prisoner, and put the iron cuffs upon their wrists once more.

It was dark now, and he led them to their horses and told them to mount, but he made their animals fast to his own, and once more bound the riders in their saddles with their lariats.

Then he picked his way carefully, and led the horses behind him, their muffled hoofs giving back no sound upon the rocky soil.

It was a steep descent, perilous in places, but he made it in safety to the prairie and there halted, staking his horse out, and cutting the mufflers off their hoofs.

He said nothing to his prisoners of his intention, but went back up the hill.

"It seems cruel, but I do not wish to have to run for it, and dismounted, those Comanches will be no longer dangerous," he muttered as he crept back to his former position.

He had taken the bearing of where the Indian ponies were stationed while it was light, and now raised his repeating rifle to his shoulder and took aim in the darkness, at the position.

His rifle was an Evans, with thirty-four shots in the magazine and one in the chamber, and at once, as he began to work it, a stream of fire seemed to fairly pour continually from the muzzle, while the shots rung out so rapidly they were hard to count.

Instantly following the first shot came wild snorting, neighing and trampling of hoofs, followed by Indian voices in alarm as they found their ponies stampeding.

The clatter of hoofs, yells of red-skins and neighing of the ponies caused Buck Taylor to feel that he had done his work well, that the equine outfit of the Comanches was stampeded, and he uttered one of his terrible war-cries and bounded away in flight.

He reached his prisoners to find that they were doing all in their power to stampede his horse and theirs, and thus escape him, when they knew from the firing what he was doing.

But he had guarded against this by passing the line around the legs of their horses as a loppie and then driving the stake.

Quickly he drew it up, mounted and rode off, while he remarked:

"You tried to give me some of my own medicine did you, pards?"

"Well, I thought you might, so was prepared for you."

"Now we head for Roundtop."

CHAPTER LV.

IN SUSPENSE.

DERRINGER DAVE had fulfilled his mission well, for he had, after parting with his chief, Buck Taylor, returned to Fort S—, and placed the facts of the situation before the commandant there, and then made known to his pards, the Lasso Kings, the wishes of their gallant leader.

The commandant was more than willing to transfer his Cowboy Rangers to the command of Colonel Forsythe, who then had the advanced post, for he knew well their worth, and as the rumor had come that Tiger Tom had not been killed, he was anxious to have the Saddle King again take his trail, and this time be assured that there was no mistake.

The fact was he felt embarrassed at the situation in which he found himself, for he had been the one to issue the order for the payment of the "reward for Tiger Tom, dead or alive."

It was true that Captain Ned Hassan, Monte Joe and the cowboys who had witnessed the duel between Buck Taylor and Tiger Tom, had testified that the cowboy chief had killed the outlaw.

Then, too, Buck Taylor in his report of the affair had stated that he had killed him, and described the meeting, as in duty bound to do.

So the money had been divided in equal parts, and paid over to the cowboys, not only to those from the fort, but to those from Soldier's Retreat who had been in the advance upon Tiger Tom's ranch at the time of his death.

That Buck Taylor had refused to take a dollar of the reward all knew, and many appreciated his feelings in the matter.

But now, against all seeming facts, came the story to Fort S—, that Tiger Tom yet lived, and it was not to be wondered at that the commander of the post was most anxious to find out if the rumor was false or not.

Derringer Dave's arrival convinced him that there was cause for the rumor, as the Cowboy Ranger told what he had seen, and all that he had heard about the Ranchero Desperado being again on the trail.

Then, too, that Buck Taylor had heard enough to convince him he must solve the mystery, proved to the commandant that Tiger Tom yet lived or some one was impersonating him.

In either case the man must be run to earth, and so it was that the commanding officer of Fort S— told Derringer Dave to get the Cowboy Rangers together, whom Buck Taylor needed, and go with them to Roundtop Post, as the Saddle King had ordered.

So the Lasso Kings, as the cowboys were more frequently called along the frontier, at once prepared for the trail, and expecting it to be a long one, they made preparations accordingly.

Every man took his two best horses, and his very best equipments—for these cowboys were well supplied with horses and accouterments—and were soon ready for the trip to Roundtop Post.

They set off under the leadership of Derringer Dave, each man with a led horse bearing his "outfit," and by taking unfrequented trails, reached Roundtop Post as they had desired to do, without being seen by any prowling bands of Indians or scouting outlaw spies, who might report their being upon the war-trail.

Colonel Forsythe was very glad to welcome them, for, a new commander upon the southern frontier, he yet had heard so much of the courage, dash and scouting-skill of Buck Taylor and his Cowboy Rangers, he was sure they would be of invaluable service to him.

He assigned them to a camp which pleased them, put them on the quartermaster and commissary rolls for supplies, and took in at a glance their daring, resolute faces and general make-up.

"They are just the men that dashing fellow, Buck Taylor, should be captain of," he said to his adjutant.

"Yes, sir, and it is wise to fight Indians and outlaws with just such men as they are, sir, for in spite of the courage of our cavalymen, and their discipline as soldiers, they cannot equal these devil-I-care Rangers in tracking, pursuing and fighting at close quarters," the adjutant replied, and he spoke from experience, for he was an old Indian-fighter.

"You are right, adjutant," continued the colonel.

"It would spread more terror to a band of Comanches, or a gang of Mexican raiders to know that Buck Taylor and his Cowboy Rangers were upon their trail, than it would to have a whole regiment of cavalry in pursuit of them."

Then the question turned upon the coming back of Buck Taylor, and as Derringer Dave could give no positive information upon this point, Colonel Forsythe began to feel some uneasiness when several days had gone by and the Lasso King failed to put in an appearance.

As he had been given ample time to have gone to Trail Crossing and back, as time passed and he did not return, the Cowboy Rangers began to grow uneasy under the suspense, and Derringer Dave after a talk with his comrades, decided to ask Colonel Forsythe to let them take the trail in search of their leader.

But ere they did so their suspense terminated in the coming of the Lasso King, and, as the reader knows, he did not come alone.

CHAPTER LXI.

THE "KINGS" WELCOME THEIR CHIEF.

THE two prisoners were deeply chagrined at the escape of the Lasso King from the Comanches.

They had felt certain that, as soon as they called out in the Comanche tongue, which they both spoke, that they were friends, and but one foe was there, and they his prisoners, the Indians would rush on and end the fight very quickly.

In the darkness, and sheltered by rocks, while Buck Taylor would have all he could do to fight off his foes, they could carry out their plan in safety to themselves.

Whether the cunning Lasso King had suspected their intention, and thus decided to risk an escape, they did not know, but at all events they had been thwarted.

They knew that a Comanche on foot was of little use, that a horse was a part of an Indian of that tribe, and more useful than his weapons.

Stampeded as were their ponies the Comanches could not think of pursuit, while they would hardly round up their horses before morning.

Then they had some dead warriors to look after, and some wounded, and the fire of the Lasso King which stampeded the ponies might have dropped half a dozen or more animals, huddled as they were together.

So the two prisoners were compelled to take the Comanches as out of the question longer as their friends and the cowboy chief's foes.

That they were in ill-humor was not to be wondered at, and they would not even answer Buck when he spoke to them.

"All right, pards, I am used to keeping silent myself," he said, in an off-hand way, and rode on at a canter.

The horses were given much needed water at a stream they crossed, and allowed to crop grass for a few minutes, when once more the Lasso King pressed on.

He had decided to ride on through the night to the fort, considering it less dangerous as there might be other bands of Comanches prowling about.

Halting now and then for water, and a short feed for the horses, and once for supper for themselves, it was dawn when at last a light appeared ahead that marked the situation of the new post.

Just as the sun was rising the Stars and Stripes were run up over the fort, and a gun announced that the day was begun, while a bugle's notes rung out cheerily over the prairie.

The sentinel in the tower had reported the coming of three horsemen, and soon a wild yell that broke forth told Buck Taylor that his Lasso Kings were there awaiting him and had discovered his approach.

As he neared the stockade entrance they came out to receive him, waving their hats and uttering their wild war-cries to the great terror of the two prisoners.

"Back again, Cap'n Buck, and glad to see you."

"The boys are here, and have been getting awful uneasy about you, though we have been behaving ourselves like Sunday-school pards," cried Derringer Dave as he rushed up to the side of Buck Taylor and grasped his hand warmly.

"Glad to see you, boys, and we start on the trail at once, for there is work for us to do," cried Buck Taylor, and his words were greeted with a ferocious yell.

They were a splendid-looking lot of fellows, most of them above the average height, broad shouldered, muscular men, with bronzed faces, fearless and resolute.

They were men to do and dare anything, stanch friends and deadly foes, but generous even to an enemy when he was once "downed."

"Introduce us to your pards, cap'n," said a tall Texan with an eagle eye, and he nodded toward the two prisoners.

"No, these are guests for Colonel Forsythe to meet first, boys," and saluting the sentinel Buck Taylor rode directly to the quarters of the colonel, and dismounting reported his arrival by an orderly, while he left his prisoners upon their horses.

"Well, Taylor, I am glad to see you back, for I feared you had gotten into some trouble," said Colonel Forsythe in a kindly tone.

"I got into scrapes and out of them again, fortunately, and I desire to make my report, sir."

"Certainly, let me hear it from alpha to omega."

Then Buck Taylor told all that had occurred to himself, to Monte Joe, and the attempted capture of Belle Hassan, with the fate of her captors.

"So Hassan's cowboys hanged the fellow."

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I can hardly blame them, yet to bring law and order here in this country justice often must be done by illegal methods, and lawless hands work out a certain salvation I suppose."

"I am glad you did not hang the two men that you and this Monte Joe captured."

"We had no idea of doing so, sir, but tried to frighten them."

"But they would not yield up their secret?"

"No, sir, not for love, money or from fear."

"Well, they have one virtue, at least, being true even to a bad cause."

"I know Hassan, and he is a splendid fellow and will make a strong ally for you, Taylor; but just who is this man Monte Joe you speak of so highly?"

"I do not know, sir, for he is man of mystery to me and to all others."

"Has he no other name?"

"None that I have ever heard, sir, or any one else."

"But you can rely upon him?"

"With my life, sir."

"And the man he shot in Trail Crossing?"

"Was not one of the Star and Tiger band, sir; but Monte Joe took his papers and the money, and put all safely away together, as he said, for future reference."

"In his case, sir, it was self-defense, as it has been with every man he has killed, and the money, he said, to Captain Hassan and myself, was counterfeit."

CHAPTER LXII.

THE LASSO KINGS TAKE THE TRAIL.

COLONEL FORSYTHE seemed surprised at the remark of Buck Taylor that the money taken from the dead man was counterfeit, and the fact that Monte Joe had told the fact to Captain Hassan and the Lasso King proved his honesty.

"Well, Taylor, I would like much to meet this Monte Joe some time, so bring him to the fort with you when you can do so."

"But now let me know, Taylor, if it is your belief that this beautiful woman, the wife of Tiger Tom, is the leader of the band?"

"That, sir, I am in doubt of."

"If we find this ghost, a double of Tiger Tom, I will be of the opinion that she is not."

"If we do not find him, then I will fear that she is."

"This story of that man's ghost, a double, is a most remarkable one, and it certainly cannot be doubted, from all the facts you give, that there is such a person."

"Trescott the Deserter was a perfect giant, as you know, and a man whose face it would be hard to find the counterpart of, for he was a very handsome fellow, with boldness and manliness in every feature."

"His form was perfect too, though so large, and I cannot see well how another of his style can be prowling about the country."

"Nor I, sir."

"Well, Taylor, as you hunted down the origi-

nal, if he is dead, you will have to run to earth the copy, if the latter is not the original, if that can be understood, for it's a paradox," and the colonel smiled.

"I understand, then, sir, that you think there is some doubt about Tiger Tom's being dead?"

"Yes, in the face of the fact that just such a man as he is, or was, exists."

"But his wife weeping at the grave?"

"She may be crazy."

"I had not thought of that, sir."

"And, again, she may not be in the secret that he was not killed outright, for his men may have resuscitated him."

"Ah! colonel, that is a new idea, sir, and her speaking to Monte Joe about seeing her husband's ghost can be thus explained, as also her weeping over the grave of her husband, she not knowing that he is not buried there."

"That is my solution of it all, Taylor; but how about these prisoners you have brought with you?"

"They belong to the Star and Tiger League, sir, and are Numbers Six and Seven."

"Number Five Monte Joe captured, and another I roped in."

"Then there were three that Captain Hassan's cowboys started off on the long trail, sir, and these make seven all told, which the band cannot account for, though I can, if they ask me."

"You might, sir, if you will pardon my suggestion, frighten these men into betraying their secret, and it would give me something to work upon at once."

"But if they are silent as the others were, then they can only be held prisoners until the rest of the band are taken, and that will show just how guilty they are, or not guilty, of being raiders."

"You have well said, Taylor, so bring in your prisoners and I will at once put them to the test, and I congratulate you upon the very clean way you turned defeat into victory by turning the tables upon them, and also upon escaping from the Comanches as you did."

"You are keeping up your record as I have always heard you spoken of."

"I thank you, Colonel Forsythe," and Buck Taylor went out after his two prisoners, who wore most anxious faces, now that they were in the fort, beyond all chance of escape.

The Lasso King approached the prisoners with a very serious face.

"Men, I have just this to say to you:

"I am just back from a scouting expedition which has laid the foundation for the utter defeat of your band."

"You number seven of its members who have fallen into my possession, in the past two weeks, three of whom are dead."

"Colonel Forsythe wishes to talk with you now, and he is not the man to trifle with."

"He was ordered here, to establish this new post, because of his record as a dashing and skillful officer and one who would accomplish all he undertook to do."

"I need only say if you can make terms with him do so, for your band will be destroyed within the month, mark my words, and, as your chief, Tiger Tom, has as many lives as a cat, I shall have to kill him over again."

"Next time I will be sure that he is dead."

Then Buck Taylor led the two men before Colonel Forsythe.

The latter drew his fine form up to its full height, and looked every inch the splendid soldier that he was.

His expressive face was stern now, and he began without any questions or preliminaries:

"Men, I know all about you, and I have just this to say to you:

"If you wish to save yourselves from death at the end of a rope, consent to guide Chief Taylor here to the retreat of your band."

"If you do this, you shall be allowed to go free with your horses and your arms, and I may say, a hundred dollars each."

"Refuse, and you face a doom from which there is no escape."

"What answer have you to make?"

"I belong to no band, and have no comrades to betray, sir," was the answer of Number Seven.

"And you?"

"I don't understand what band you means, sir."

"The Tigers of Texas."

"I don't know nothing about 'em, sir."

"Orderly!"

The orderly appeared.

"Send a sergeant and file of men here to conduct these outlaws to the guard-house where they are to be put in double irons."

The men winced, but neither spoke and they were led away soon after by the orderly.

"Well, Taylor, that band has men in it true as steel but now, when do you go on the trail with your men?"

"To-night, sir."

"They are a brave lot of fellows, and I am proud of them; but the adjutant tells me they are the greatest poker-players ever known, for they have broke every soldier at the post, and as for a horse trade, they have gotten the best the cavalry afforded."

"If they fight as they play poker and trade

horses, you have nothing to fear," and the colonel laughed heartily as Buck Taylor tried to offer an excuse for his men, such as it was.

That night the Lasso King started upon the trail of the Tigress of Texas, and their chief led them to the rendezvous which he had told Monte Joe he would be in when wanted, and from whence he could pounce upon the old Mission Lanch in a very short while if need came for so doing.

CHAPTER LVIII.

MONTE JOE STRIKES A TRAIL.

MONTE JOE returned to Trail Crossing without adventure, leading the horse of the man he had captured.

He made it his business to arrive after night-fall, and rode at once to the hotel stables where he had the horse put up.

"Sambo," he said to the negro in charge there:

"If any one recognizes that horse I brought in, you let me know just who the man is."

"Yas sah, I will," assured Sambo, who fairly worshiped the gambler, for Monte Joe had once saved him from an infuriated crowd who suspected him of a murder, and proved that the negro was not guilty, and it was afterward found to be the case.

Having changed his attire and had supper, Monte Joe went into the gambling saloon and began to play.

He noted a number of strange faces present, but went quickly on with his game, and as usual was a winner.

It was late when he left and he did not rise until late the next morning.

Then he was told Sambo wished to see him.

Going out to the stable he found Sambo with a mysterious look upon his face.

The negro led him out of earshot and said:

"Dere was seboral mean lookin' gemmans as recommendered dat horse, boss."

"Ahl when?"

"Well, sah, dey come in here dis mornin', while I were a-sleepin' in de hay in de next stall to de horse, for I sits up late, and doesn't rise 'arly accordin'."

"I heerd one say dat 'dat's Morgan's horse, fer a hundred dollars."

"T'other said:

"'Yas, we must look him up.'"

"Den two more come, and as dey didn't see me dey talked right out."

"What did they say, Sambo?"

"Dey said, sah, dey wondered if Morgan had brought other orders, for if not, dey must all git out ter-night fer de retreat at Cave Canyon, fer de meetin' was called sart'in fer next Sunday, to be held in de Booty Cave, and every member was ter be present or git a severe punishment."

"Dat is about what dey said, sah, only dey was all a-talkin' tergether, and I only catched on to de bottom facts ob de case."

"I see, and I guess you did get down to bed-rock, Sambo, for I understand exactly the whole situation."

"And more: Sambo, I wish you not to say a word about what you heard, but to-night go with me to one of the windows of the saloon and point out those men to me."

"Yas, sah."

"And I wish my black horse, Racer, ready for me to-night, and Tireless, too, as a pack-animal, for I am going on a trip—only keep dark."

"I bound to keep dark, sah; 'cause, look at me," was Sambo's facetious response.

"Well, I wish you to shed no light upon this dark subject, Sambo, and when I return it is gold in your purse and plenty of it."

"Golly, boss! I intends ter make me a purse ag'in' your comin', fer I hain't got one."

"All right; I'll fill it if you don't make it as long as the Moral Law of New England."

"No, sah; it'll be some shorter den dat."

And with the information received, meager though it seemed, Monte Joe seemed very much pleased.

He remained in his room most of the day, and had any one called, they would have found him asleep.

At dark he arose and made his usually careful toilet, after which he had supper and went out to see Sambo.

The negro was awaiting him, and going to a window of the saloon, he pointed out the men who had spoken of the strange horse as being Morgan's.

He further said that over a dozen men had ordered their horses for that night, and that they had concluded that the strange animal could not be Morgan's as they had not seen their friend around Trail Crossing.

Then Monte Joe went into the gambling-saloon and began to play.

Though interested in his game, it seemed, he yet noted well the face of each man pointed out to him by Sambo.

He also counted the strangers present, and observed that they were not unknown to each other.

He got into a game of cards with several, and by close watching caught a sight of the palms of two of them and was sure that he detected the brand of the Star and the Tiger.

As the evening passed he saw signs between

the strangers and they began to drop out of the saloon one by one.

He waited until the last one was gone, then ended a game abruptly, though winning, and left the saloon.

Straight to his rooms in the hotel he went and soon changed his costume for one for the saddle.

Then he went by the hotel kitchen and got a bag of provisions already put up for him by his orders in the morning.

"Well, Sambo, you have been on watch?"

"Yas, sah."

"How many left here?"

"Eleven, sah."

"And you discovered the trail they took?"

"Yas, sah, they went out on de river trail, which goes by de haunted Ranch."

"Together?"

"No, sah, one, two and three together."

"And others went from the town?"

"Yas, sah, from other taverns."

"Good! now I will take my horses."

They were brought, and all except his saddle and bridle and himself, was put upon the led horse, Tireless, while he mounted Racer, and two better animals were not to be found in Texas.

"Now for Soldier's Retreat Ranch, horses, and you have got to travel hard," he said, as he struck the trail out of Trail Crossing.

CHAPTER LIX.

OFF FOR THE SEAT OF WAR.

"DELIGHTED to see you, Monte Joe, and we were just going to have breakfast when Belle spied you coming as she was looking out on the prairie through her glass," and Captain Hassan greeted the gambler as he dismounted at his door.

"First, Captain Hassan, can Tonto devote himself to my two horses, for they have come at a rapid pace, as I left Trail Crossing at midnight."

"You don't mean it?"

"What splendid animals!" and Tonto the peon was told to look after the two horses as he well knew how to do.

Then ascending the piazza the handsome gambler was welcomed by ever hospitable Mrs. Hassan and Belle.

It was a pleasant breakfast for all, and after the meal Monte Joe said:

"Now, captain, if you will order your horse, and a fresh animal for me, I would like to take a ride with you over to the cowboy camp."

The horses were ordered, and as the two rode away together Captain Hassan said:

"Something of importance has happened to bring you here in such haste."

"Yes, captain, there has."

"To-day is Friday, and on Sunday, at Cavern Canyon, in the big cave there known to some as the Cathedral, there is to be a musterling of the clans, or in other words, of the men who wear the brand of the Star and Tiger."

"Buck Taylor should be there, for I put the brand into his hand, with ordinary ink however," said the captain with a laugh.

"He is to be there, for I am going after him; but in case he may not have arrived, or may be delayed, I came to you, for you and your men will do the work."

"If he is at the camp he told us of, then with your force at one end, and Buck's Lasso Kings at the other end of the Cavern Canyon, we can catch every one of those fellows in a trap from which there is no escape."

"This is glorious!"

"Some twenty of the band left Trail Crossing just before I did for the rendezvous, and there may be as many more leave other places, so they will have a good number and you will need all of your gallant band of cowboys."

"I will take every man who can leave the ranch, for with those men there, of course there can be no danger of a raid upon us here."

"I'll vouch for that, sir, so when can you come with your men?"

"To-night, so that no one shall know of our departure, should there be any one on the watch."

"That will bring you to the rendezvous before dawn."

"Do you expect to go on ahead?"

"Yes, sir, I will depart some hours in advance, so as to find what Buck has left there, and to go on to his camp if he has told us where he can be found."

"I will go on with you, Monte Joe, and Rio Grande Rob can start with the men as soon as it is dark."

"I shall be glad of your company, sir, and the canyon will be the very place for your men to hide in until they move upon Cavern Canyon Sunday."

"Yes, and Buck must be beyond the range somewhere, to close in at the other end."

"I only hope nothing has detained him," said Monte Joe, and the two now rode into the cowboys' camp.

Rio Grande Rob came forward to greet them, and Captain Hassan said quickly:

"Rob, how many men can you spare in a good cause, for several days' work?"

"Well, sir, I must leave two here in camp, and four to look after the cattle."

"Yas."

"That will give me twenty-six men, sir."

"Well, get them ready to move just after dark, and they must go armed to the teeth, and with an abundance of ammunition."

"Take a week's provisions, on pack-animals, and your very best horses, with at least half a dozen extras."

"Yas, sir."

"I shall go with Monte Joe some time early in the afternoon, and have Conley guide you to the camp in the canyon, where Buck Taylor took us on our last trip."

"I understand, sir."

"Your prisoners are all right, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir, they are safe."

With this Captain Hassan and Monte Joe returned to the house, and the gambler had a look at his horses.

They had been rubbed dry and sleek by Tonto, and looked as though they had not been put to the hard ride of the night before.

"They'll be as fresh as daisies by this afternoon, for they will have had eight hours' good rest, if not more," said Monte Joe.

Going into the house Captain Hassan explained to Mrs. Hassan and Belle the situation, and the latter said with enthusiasm:

"If I was only a man to go too!"

"If Brother Buck does not get there on time I will never forgive him."

It was just four o'clock when the captain's fine horse, and those of Monte Joe were led around to the door, the latter perfectly rested and full of spirit.

Having said farewell to the ladies, the two men mounted and rode away just four hours ahead of the starting time for Rio Grande Rob and his men.

They rode slowly but steadily, making only two halts for rest, and soon after midnight entered the canyon, the moon guiding them on their way.

Dismounting, Monte Joe went at once to the crevice in the rocks, where Buck Taylor had said that he would put a letter, and he called out quickly:

"I have it!"

"Good!"

A match was lighted, some leaves set on fire, and then Monte Joe read:

"FRIDAY NIGHT."

"Ten o'clock."

"I came here after dark not to be seen, and return at once to my camp, for I wrote this before leaving."

"There are signs of Indians about, and several white men were seen by my scouts to-day in the neighborhood of Cavern Canyon."

"You will find me at Smoky Hill in the center of the five canyons."

"I will keep my force hidden for some days, and have only my scouts at work."

"B. T."

"This is most satisfactory."

"Yes, Captain Hassan, all that we could wish," was Monte Joe's answer.

"You will go on to Smoky Hill to-night?"

"At once, for we can reach there by dawn, and I know the place well."

"Rob will camp here with his men, and to-morrow night we can come back and join your boys, ready to move Sunday upon the Tigers' lair."

So after a short rest they mounted their horses and rode on to the Smoky Hill, Monte Joe showing that he knew the country well, more and more to the surprise of Captain Hassan, who could not understand how it was that it was so.

CHAPTER LX.

THE SECRET CALL.

THE band, or league, known as the Star and Tiger, was certainly most thoroughly well managed by whoever was the chief.

Whatever the motive of the League, or the tie that bound them together, there seemed to be among the members a bond that could not be broken, that no bribery or fear could sever.

Those who were the men of the League wore the brand in the left hand, it seemed, of the blue star of five points, with the red tiger in the center, and the letters in the points of the star—Texas Tiger.

Upon a night before the return of Monte Joe to Trail Crossing, a number of strange men arrived in the settlement.

They did not come together, but by twos, threes and singly.

They also seemed not to know each other, and appeared bent upon seeing the place most thoroughly.

A close observer might have noticed that these strangers were all well mounted and armed, and that they appeared to congregate near to each other when in crowds.

While several of them were standing one afternoon before the door of the Lone Star Tavern, a horseman rode up and dismounted.

He simply nodded to the group of men, though his keen eyes took each and every man in most thoroughly.

He also glanced about him, and then, seeing no one else near, raised his left hand to his forehead, holding it there an instant.

The act was at once repeated by each man of the group, and there were five of them.

Then the strange horseman spoke in a low, but distinct tone, saying but one word:

"Numbers!"

"Twenty!" cried one.

"Sixteen!"

"Thirteen!"

"Eleven!"

"Thirty-one!"

"Twenty-two!"

These numbers were spoken distinctly by each man, and the stranger, who held in his hand a slip of paper and a pencil, appeared to check off each number as it was spoken.

Then he said in a low tone, which all understood, however:

"Cavern Canyon, Sunday next at noon, meeting of League."

"Let no man fail to be there, under penalty of—you know!"

There was something almost painfully significant in the manner in which he said the last words—"you know."

Then he glanced at the list he held in his hand and called out again the numbers:

"Twenty!"

"Yes," answered the man who had given that number, and the one calling the roll checked each one as it was answered to.

"Sixteen!"

"Thirteen!"

"Eleven!"

"Thirty-one!"

"Twenty-two!"

As though satisfied, he went on to the stables, and thence into the hotel.

He saw others whom he seemed to know, for he went up to them, and the same scene was gone through with as with the group before the tavern door.

Whether they were one or a half a dozen together, the scene was the same.

That night the strange man appeared in the gambling saloon, and in a quiet, secret way, others were found who had the same orders given them, to appear at Cavern Canyon on the following Sunday, and each one was notified by a number which he responded to, instead of a name.

It was soon after this, a day or two maybe, that the men thus informed of what the secret orders were, by the strange courier, began to depart from Trail Crossing.

They went singly, in pairs and a few in bands of from three to five.

There were other settlements visited by the secret courier, some cowboy camps and perhaps a hunting post or two, but every man who answered to a number in the mysterious League of the Star and Tiger, seemed to be known where to be found, and was accordingly notified.

The result was that a number of horsemen were going by many trails in the direction of the old Mission Ranch, the house where had dwelt the Desperado Ranchero.

Yet at the ranch itself there were no arrivals, and all went on in the even tenor of its way, Dagger Don showing apt management and a devotion to the duties devolving upon him, as well as a desire to please the beautiful woman who was now the "Cattle Queen," as she was called by the few cowboys belonging to the place.

Had any one followed the secret courier in his rounds to warn all of the members of the League of the Star and Tiger to be at the rendezvous in the Cavern Canyon, they would have discovered that he performed his duty most faithfully.

He went to one and all of the men whom it was possible to find, and jotted down upon his list the names of those whom it had been impossible to discover, in the settlements, camps, or on the trails.

Then he turned the head of his horse toward the rendezvous, and entered the canyon after nightfall, being anxious, seemingly, not to be seen going there.

It was a wild, picturesque place, this Canyon of Caverns, for the rocks, towering high on either side, were filled with caves where a small army could have taken refuge.

It was narrow, yet there were grass-plots here and there, springs flowing toward a common center and forming a stream, trees growing in groups here and there, and altogether a haunt most suitable for a rendezvous of outlaws.

There were Indian legends about the canyon that caused them to avoid it, lone white hunters never went there, and off from the main trails, north and south, trains never passed through it, for the frontiersmen held a superstitious dread of going near it.

Yet the courier rode boldly into the canyon by night as though he held no fear of its weird superstitions.

CHAPTER LXI.

THE GIANT CHIEF.

As though well acquainted with the trails through the Canyon of Caverns, the courier turned off from the main way and went in among a mass of rocks upon one side of the vast gulch.

Here was a spring, with piled-up masses of

rocks, pines, and a bit of meadow land through which flowed a rivulet formed of springs.

The moonlight revealed a horse staked out upon the meadow land, a very large, black animal of fine points in spite of his size.

Over in the wall of rocks was visible a huge cavernous opening, and in it glimmered a light, as from a flickering fire.

The rocks towering above and upon either side of the large cavern had given it the name among the hunters and scouts who had seen it of "The Cathedral."

The courier staked his horse out among the rocks, where plots of grass grew, and then gave three sharp whistles.

They were promptly answered from within the cabin by two blasts, which he again responded to by one.

As he neared the spacious entrance a tall form appeared there, dimly seen with the glimmer of the firelight behind him.

"I am here, chief," the courier said, as he advanced.

"You have done your work quickly, Barlow."

"Come in, for I was just having my supper," and the man led the way back into the cavern.

A walk of a hundred feet and he came to where a pile of large logs burned brightly upon the rocky flooring of the cavern, the draught carrying the smoke away to some means of egress at the other end of the roof.

There was a bed of blankets spread near the fire, a saddle and bridle lying near, and both richly mounted with silver, a few cooking utensils, in one of which some bacon was frying, while a venison steak broiled on the coals.

A hoe-cake was cooking in the ashes and a pot of boiling coffee sent forth most appetizing fumes.

The man who led the courier to the fire was a perfect giant in size, for he was just under seven feet.

His form was perfect, and graceful, by no means awkward or unwieldy, while his movements were quick and energetic, not at all like the slow action of very large men usually.

His hair was dark and worn long, falling to his waist, and his face, bronzed by exposure to the weather, was one of character, expressive, fearless, reckless and sinister, for the expressions were as fickle as a weather-vane.

His teeth were even, snow-white, and he had a way of showing them when he talked that was suggestive of a vicious nature and a dangerous one.

His hands and feet were small, his form upright and possessing a military bearing, and his manner a trifle nervous it seemed.

He was dressed in buckskin leggings, fringed down the outer seam and stuck in high-top-boots, which were armed with massive spurs.

He wore a gray woolen shirt, a blue army fatigue cavalry jacket, and a black sombrero embroidered with gold thread.

A black silk scarf was knotted, sailor fashion, under the collar of his shirt, and in it sparkled a large ruby, while, its match in size and beauty, a diamond was upon the little finger of his left hand.

About his waist was a belt in which were four revolvers, one on either hip, one on either side, and a large, ugly-looking knife worn in front, in a scabbard fast to straps crossing his breast over his shoulders.

A man of giant strength and nerve he looked to be, and one to do and dare anything.

Another weapon, for such it was worn as, which hung by a hook to his belt, just over his right hip, was a splendid lasso.

As he dropped down upon his knees before the fire, and gave the venison steak a turn upon the coals he said:

"You see that you are just in time, Barlow, and there is plenty for both of us."

"I thank you, chief, but I am very hungry I warn you, and tired, too, for I have had no rest to speak of since leaving you."

"I can well understand that, Barlow, to have made the time you did."

"But you will have ample time to rest now, as we shall not move for some days yet."

"Sunday is the day appointed for the men to assemble in council, sir," said the courier.

"Yes, and Monday night we will move, or rather Sunday night, lie by Monday in hiding, and strike our blows in the night."

"The surprise will be a perfect one, chief, for none of the rancheros are expecting a raid, the settlements have no anticipation of trouble, and it will take a couple of days for them to discover what has happened, who their enemy is and where he has gone."

"By which time we can be across the Rio Grande into Mexico with the cattle and plunder, and they will not dare to follow us, while if they do, what will they find?"

"Nothing but hard knocks, sir, for a few men can beat back many from the trails you take."

"Yes, and I will send but few men, for the larger portion of my band must return to their posts in Texas so that not one of them will be suspected."

"But now tell me, Barlow, just what you have done and how you did it?"

"I can talk better, sir, after I have eaten supper," was the smiling response of the secret courier.

CHAPTER LXII.

THE COURIER'S REPORT.

WHEN the supper was ready Barlow the courier proved his words as to having a good appetite to such an extent that the giant chief began to doubt his assertion that there was enough for both of them, for he too was a hearty eater.

But at last the courier expressed himself satisfied, and having brought in his saddle and spread his blankets to make himself comfortable, he lighted his pipe and was ready to talk.

"Now, Barlow, what of your trip?" said the giant chief, lighting a very large and handsome pipe carved to represent a human skull.

"Well, chief, I went as you told me, first to the ranch."

"And who did you see there?"

"The cowboy manager; Dagger Don they call him."

"Yes."

"And I saw also the lady."

"My wife?"

"Yes, chief."

"What had she to say?"

"I obeyed your orders, sir, not to speak of you, but told her I was a member of the old band, and had been in Mexico for some time, fearing to return to Texas."

"That was right; but did she speak of me?"

"Yes, sir."

"What did she say?" and the giant chief seemed to feel deepest interest in the reply of the man he questioned.

"She asked me, sir, if I had heard that it was said that you had not been killed by Buck Taylor the cowboy chief."

"Yes?"

"And that you had been seen on the trails."

"I understand."

"I told her that I had heard such stories."

"And then?"

"She said that she had not been superstitious, that she had never believed in ghosts until of late, and then her feelings had changed, for she had seen you on several occasions."

"Indeed?" and there was a sneer on the man's lips.

"Yes, sir, and more, you had appeared to her, while Dagger Don had seen you also."

"Well?"

"She told me that Dagger Don had confessed to her that he fled in terror while she had fainted at sight of you, and now she was assured that the dead came back to earth again, that your spirit had come to her, and those who had asserted that they had seen you upon the trails had really beheld your ghost."

The giant chief burst forth into a fit of laughter that was mocking in its ring, and was then silent for some time, the courier also keeping silence as though waiting to be spoken to again.

At last the chief said:

"Did you speak to this Dagger Don of what the fair lady my wife had said?"

"I did sir."

"And what said he?"

"That he had seen your ghost and hoped never to see it again."

"Did you give any one at the ranch orders to come here to the rendezvous for Sunday?"

"I did not, sir; under the circumstances I deemed it best not to do so."

"You did right, Barlow."

"But then where went you from the ranch?"

"To the settlement of Trail Crossing, sir."

"Well?"

"I began to pick out the men there and give them the call for the meeting on Sunday, and in fact, there I found two-thirds of those I was in search of."

"I put down each number as I met the man answering to it, and as to whether he had been ordered, or not, and why if not."

"So I placed opposite the number of the men at the ranch the words:

"Not ordered for reasons to be explained."

"I went to the other settlements also, and to the camps of hunters and cowboys, where the League was known to have a member, and thus went the rounds, sir."

"And how many were not ordered?"

"Well, sir, Dagger Don and four men at the ranch, whose numbers are here," and he produced his list which the chief took and examined.

"Then, sir," continued Barlow the courier, "there are others who have either been killed, or are in prison, or have deserted, and there are the numbers," and as the courier placed his finger upon the numbers representing the men hanged by Captain Hassan's cowboys, and who had been captured by Buck Taylor and Monte Joe, it revealed how near he guessed the truth, and how well he had done his work.

The giant chief went over the list most carefully and then said:

"You have done well, Barlow, and there will be men enough here for the work I have in view, leaving out those you did not find, and the men at the old Mission Ranch whom you gave no orders to."

"But you were careful to have no mistake about this place of meeting?"
 "They all understood it, sir, perfectly."
 "And the time?"
 "Sunday, sir."
 "And not to come together?"
 "To come alone, or in pairs and small parties not exceeding five, chief."
 "That is right."
 "But now tell me if you have seen aught of Buck Taylor?"
 "No, sir, but I heard that he had gone to Fort S—"
 "And has become a greater hero since killing me?" mused the chief.
 "Oh yes, sir, it was a feather in his cap of course."
 "And Monte Joe?"
 "I saw him, sir, at Trail Crossing."
 "Gambling, of course?"
 "Yes, sir."
 "Well, Buck Taylor and Monte Joe are to one day become my prisoners," was the almost savagely uttered words of the giant chief.

CHAPTER LXIII.

THE MEETING OF THE CLAN.

It was Friday night when the first man of the League of the Star and Tiger, rode into the Canyon of Caverns, and gave the signal, which was promptly answered by Courier Barlow, who was on watch.

He and the chief were relieving each other on duty, as it was necessary for some one to be constantly on the watch after the return of the courier.

After the coming of this man others began to drop in, one by one and in groups until by Saturday at midnight all who had been given orders by Barlow the courier, had reported.

Several large fires had been built in the cavern, known as the Cathedral, from wood brought in from the hills, and a bright, ruddy glare illuminated the large cave, presenting, with the two-score men gathered there a wild and picturesque scene.

The giant chief was there, silent, stern-faced, and regarded with awe by his men, for many of them had been at the lasso duel between him and Buck Taylor, had seen him fall as though dead, and, believed to be dead, knew that he had been carried to his wife by order of his slayer, and then had been placed in the grave.

There was something so uncanny in the thought of this man, who had been buried, who had actually lain in his grave, being alive and now preparing to strike again at his foes, that it was not to be wondered at that the men of his band regarded him with awe.

They were afraid of the terrible chief before his duel with Buck Taylor, and they were doubly so now.

Some of them actually believed him at first to be in the spirit rather than the flesh, the more superstitious ones of the band, and held aloof from him as much as they could.

But they had received the call of their leader to meet him at the rendezvous of the Canyon of Caverns, and not one thus ordered had had the temerity to disobey, for they were iron-clad laws that bound them together, laws not one had yet dared break.

Now, in the bright glare of the firelights the giant chief paced to and fro, while his men were grouped together awaiting for him to speak.

Near him stood Barlow with the list of members in his hand, and yet the name of each man was opposite the number he was known by, though this name, his real one, was known only to the leader and the one whom he made his aide, as the courier had been, or rather was.

The men watched the stern, handsome and sinister face of their giant chief, as he walked to and fro in the full glare of the firelight, not one daring to break in upon his silent reverie.

They were a daring lot of men, brave mostly, yet desperate, reckless and lawless one would say.

At last the chief paused and sent his penetrating eyes over the assembly.

He appeared to see every man present, and each one seemed to feel the magnetism of his glance and quail under it, as though his thoughts were read clearly.

Then came the stern order, in a deep, yet melodious voice:

"Hands up!"

The hand, the left one, of each man was raised above his head.

"Palms out!"

The palms were turned toward the light, and the chief passed slowly along the line, glancing at each hand.

What he saw in the left palm seemed to satisfy him, for he said, after his tour of inspection was completed:

"Hands down!"

Down went the hands at the order, and then came the command:

"Call the roll, Barlow!"

The courier proceeded to do so, calling by numbers, not by names.

As the numbers of those present were called,

the men answered to them, while, when a number was called, the man not being present who represented it, an almost ominous silence followed.

Men glanced at each other, then at the roll-caller, next at the chief, yet no one spoke a word.

At last the aide turned to his chief and said:

"You have heard, sir?"

"Yes."

"Shall I read the numbers unanswered?"

"Yes."

"And the reasons of absence as far as known?"

"Yes."

Then came the numbers of the absent ones, with such excuses for absence as Barlow had set down opposite each one.

When the numbers were called representing the three men who had attempted to kidnap Belle Hassan, and had been hanged for their act by the cowboys of Soldier's Retreat Ranch, the giant chief asked:

"Who present can account for these men?"

Not a man spoke.

Then came the numbers of those captured by Buck Taylor and Monte Joe.

"Who present can account for the absence of these men?" sternly asked the chief.

No reply came, and all looked at each other in silence until the giant chief's voice again fell upon their ears with the words:

"Now, men of the Star and Tiger League, I have something to say to you."

CHAPTER LXIV.

THE TIGER'S PLOT.

THE lawless clan was all silence and attention at the words of their chief.

They knew that some movement of importance was afoot, and they hoped to have some explanation as to the supposed death of their desperate leader, for many of them were very uneasy on that score.

At last after the silence had become really painful, the giant chief turned again upon the men and said in a voice which was low, distinct and impressive:

"It has been thought that I, Tiger Tom, was dead."

"Many of you here now were present at my ranch when I called you to my defense, at the time Buck Taylor and his cowboy clan came to attack me."

"You are aware that the trouble was settled by a duel between the Saddle King and myself, a duel fought with lariats."

"You know that in that duel I was worsted, yes, supposed to be killed."

"It was the closest call of my life, for I lay as dead, like one in a trance, so resembling death from the shock, which paralyzed my vitality to such an extent that I was placed in the grave."

"That one person did not believe me to be dead is proven by my presence, for he rescued me from the grave."

"How, where, it was done is of no consequence, so that I am now here with you, again before you, your chief, Tiger Tom."

"That my wife has believed me dead is true, and all who have seen me have regarded me as not of the earth, but a spirit."

"So be it, so let them believe."

"But I am again myself, again the Tiger of Texas, ready to lead you upon the trail to win gold."

"I, too, have a trail of revenge to follow, for I intend again to meet the Lasso King, Buck Taylor, again to face him in the death-struggle."

"I intend also to meet Monte Joe, the gambler of Trail Crossing, for I have a score to settle with him too."

"But now my mission is one of gold, and for that I have called you together."

"Let those who see me believe what they will, that I am man or ghost, but I shall lead you to riches."

"This League of the Star and Tiger was formed for mutual support and riches."

"We are all of us exiles from our homes, fugitives from justice and lead desperate, lawless lives."

"It is to our advantage to still remain unknown, to still be considered in the settlements what we now appear to be."

"We will strike hard, on the trail we are to take, and once we have gotten our plunder and cattle across the Rio Grande to safety, all but a few men whom I need to aid me care for the herds, will disperse to their haunts."

"My first trail will be to the settlement of Trail Crossing."

"We must strike it at night, sweep through it like an avalanche, then head for the chain of mountains, of which Captain Hassan's is the last, and there especially the richest booty awaits us."

"He must not be harmed—Captain Ned Hassan I mean—nor his wife; but his daughter is to be taken captive, for her father will pay a very heavy ransom for her restoration."

"Monte Joe, at Trail Crossing, must also be taken alive, if he is there, for I have a score, as I said, to settle with him, one which I alone must square."

"Now, men, you understand what is before you, and you are to look well to your horses tonight, get your weapons in perfect condition, and spend to-morrow in complete rest."

"It was to have no man start upon this raid in a tired condition, he or his horse, that I appointed this meeting for noon Sunday, with orders to come to the Canyon of Caverns by night, the night before."

"Now do you understand me?"

The men had listened in breathless silence to the words of their giant chief.

His bold plan to win booty and gold by a raid upon the settlements, chimed in exactly with their daring natures, and they were only too glad to follow the lead of one whom they so well knew they could trust.

That he knew what he was about, they were well aware, and had a firm belief in the idea that he was at that time well acquainted with the positions of troops, the movements of the Cowboy Rangers, and the defensive strength of the settlements and ranches that lay in their track.

In answer to his question as to whether he was understood by them, the whole crowd shouted as one man:

"We do! and we stand by our chief, Tiger Tom!"

"Then seek rest, and be ready for my call, at dark to-morrow night," was the order of the chief.

So it was that the band sought rest, little dreaming that the foes they so dreaded were even then encircling them in a trap, from which there was but the slightest chance of an escape.

CHAPTER LXV.

LIKE RATS IN A TRAP.

Now to return to the Lasso Kings in their camps.

It was just dawn when a cowboy sentinel, in the retreat selected by Buck Taylor, challenged sharply:

"Halt, or I fire!"

"The Lasso Kings!" responded Monte Joe, and then came the order:

"Dismount and advance!"

Both Monte Joe and Captain Hassan did as ordered, and five minutes after they were in the camp of the Lasso King, and receiving a warm welcome from Buck Taylor.

The latter heard the story of Monte Joe, and then said:

"I am sure it is as you say, for my scouts have seen half a dozen men moving in that direction."

"They could have captured some of them, but I gave orders to lie hidden under all circumstances."

"Your position here allows you to move upon Cavern Canyon at the north end?"

"Yes."

"And Captain Hassan can easily move upon the south end."

"The very thing for we will have them like rats in a trap."

"How many men have you, Buck?"

"I make the thirty-fifth."

"Then not an outlaw should escape."

"None must do so," was Buck Taylor's reply.

"Yes, the Tigers of Texas must be wiped out utterly this time," said Captain Hassan.

All day the captain and Monte Joe remained in the camp of the Lasso Kings, and the plan of action was fully decided upon.

Then they departed for the camp of the cowboys, and it was arranged that a scout should go from each force and take positions near the Cavern Canyon to report when the outlaws had moved into the rendezvous.

Returning to the canyon they found Rio Grande Rob there, and Monte Joe was the man who went on scouting duty, for no fatigue seemed to have any effect upon his iron frame.

Buck Taylor had also decided to be the scout to go from his command, and both were in their respective positions by dawn.

It was just noon, when neither knowing aught of the others' movements, returned to their camps and reported that the "rats had entered the trap."

At once both commands got in motion and went at a sharp canter for their respective positions.

The cowboys under Monte Joe, for Captain Hassan had insisted upon Monte Joe being leader, had to pass within view of the old Mission Ranch, as they went over the prairie at the base of the range.

Each band, upon reaching the entrance to the Cavern Canyon moved in by fours, and the rattle of many hoofs brought out of a large cave two-score men in alarm, and ready for action.

The wild war-cries of the Lasso Kings were answered by Monte Joe and his cowboys, and all rushed upon the Tigers of Texas, who stood their ground and fought like demons.

But they were driven back into the large cavern and shot down, beaten down on all sides, though Lasso Kings and cowboys fell also in the desperate battle.

Still the outer line of the Texans remained unbroken until suddenly came a rush of a dozen mounted men out of the cavern.

At their head was Tiger Tom, and he bore all down before him, forcing his way through, though but a few of his men could follow him, and he dashed down the canyon like an avalanche.

Both Buck Taylor and Monte Joe had been some distance away as he charged through, and as soon as they could mount and follow they did so.

And until nightfall they pursued the Tiger of Texas, when he gave them the slip in the darkness.

Then they returned to the canyon to behold the fruits of their victory, though it had been dearly bought with the lives of half a dozen Lasso Kings and as many cowboys, while double the number were wounded.

A score of dead Tigers were there, and nearly every prisoner was wounded more or less severely.

But the Tigers of Texas were destroyed, excepting their chief and several men who escaped with him, for the next day they were tracked to where they had crossed the Rio Grande into Mexico.

CHAPTER LXVI.

CONCLUSION.

THE next day, to solve the mystery about Tiger Tom's death, the Texans went to his ranch and opened the grave in the pines.

The face of the devoted wife of the desperado, when told that the grave was empty, revealed that she had believed him dead, for upon the night when Dagger Don was to watch for the ghost, he had been so startled, brave man that he was, that he had fled in terror from the spot.

Why Tiger Tom had not made himself known to her, his poor, unfortunate wife could not tell. "But I will remain here," she said firmly.

"Yes, I will remain here where has been his home and mine."

And so she was left alone in her sorrow, in which was the hope in her heart that her husband would yet return to her, though she hoped in vain.

That Tiger Tom had been rescued from the grave by some of his men was the solution put upon his escape, yet Captain Hassan could never understand how a man he had pronounced dead could come to life again.

When Buck Taylor, with his wounded men and prisoners returned to Fort Roundtop, Monte Joe accompanied him, and Captain Hassan also, the cowboys returning to the ranch under Rio Grande Rob with their wounded.

The moment Colonel Forsythe saw Monte Joe he said, warmly:

"My dear Montevan, I am delighted to see you, and—"

"Sh! colonel; Buck Taylor and Captain Hassan know me not as Captain Joseph Montevan, of the United States Army, on secret service for the Government to hunt down outlaws and counterfeiters, but as Monte Joe, the gambler, of Trail Crossing."

"But as no one else suspects my identity, so let it be."

And thus the secret came out of who Monte Joe really was.

When Captain Hassan started home, "Monte Joe" returned with him, and it was soon after asserted, among those who professed to know, that he not only loved Belle Hassan, but that she loved him in return.

Let us hope that it was so, for they are a splendid match for each other—

"Souls with but a single thought,
Hearts that beat as one."

As for Buck Taylor and his gallant Lasso Kings, they became indeed heroes of the prairies, and continuing in the service of the Government as half cowboys, half mounted scout rangers, they rendered daring services on many another red trail which form themes of thrilling romances written of the Lone Star State.

THE END.

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